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EVERYONE IS ANXIOUS:
A NARRATIVE FOR ADMISSIONS PROFESSIONALS,
STUDENTS, AND PARENTS, ON COLLEGE ADMISSIONS AND
ANXIETY

A Thesis Presented

by

Sarah F. Hecklau

to

That Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

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ABSTRACT

Written in the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) style of writing, this thesis explores my personal experience as a college admissions counselor. It offers a reflection of my own college search and application experience, my perspective on the experience of today's high school students, and my professional experience working within an admissions office. The juxtaposition of these three perspectives alongside scholarly references on higher education, philosophy, and anxiety, provides a full-spectrum view of the college admissions process.

The core topic of this reflection is anxiety, and showing how each party experiences anxiety in the college search, application, and selection process. Other topics such as social media use, technological advances, parental involvement, and self-care are explored as factors that can induce, or reduce, anxiety. The intertwining of my own college story with the stories of current students shows how quickly the admissions process can change, but how the feelings experienced remain similar. This SPN writing was an opportunity to reflect on my work as an admissions counselor and provide a view into an often-shrouded industry. My hope is that my experiences, first as a high school student and then as an admissions professional, and the experiences of today's current students will help to show the commonalities between each party. The understanding of these commonalities, especially shared anxieties, could create the support and understanding that the admissions industry desperately needs. This work provides suggestions and guidance on how to work through anxiety in hopes of lessening the impact that anxiety has on the complicated college admissions process.

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I would like to acknowledge, and thank, so many of my classmates in the Interdisciplinary program. Their stories inspired me and their kind words pushed me to share my stories. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the support of Akshar Patel, a friend and colleague, and classmate within the Interdisciplinary program. He helped me in my decision to attend graduate school, and supported me in my professional work and my schoolwork. His tenacious desire to learn, and his sense of humor, constantly push me to be my best self.

The writing of this thesis took place during a turbulent time in my professional life and personal life. There were many days where I thought I would not be capable of completing this thesis. My family and friends provided ears that would listen, as well as unwavering support. Thank you for being supportive and positive on the days that I could not be.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction & Background

1.1 Personal Statement - An Introduction

As I write this, I am holed up in a hotel room watching rain fall steadily outside my window. I am attending to work related travel in the Rochester area of New York State. My job, as an undergraduate admissions representative, causes me to travel throughout the year. Much of my travel time is spent in cars, planes, parking lots, and hotel rooms, areas that are perfect for thinking, analyzing, or daydreaming.

A lot of this time is spent thinking about my work, my life, and my dreams. My work in higher education has shaped almost all of my adult life. It has had a profound impact on me, although I often do not even realize this impact as the moments are passing. It played a part in my personal life, my career goals, my mental health, my lifestyle, and my philosophical beliefs. It is the impetus for this thesis. But before I delve into the thesis proposal and framework, I believe a bit of background would be helpful. As Mary Pipher notes in her book *Writing to Change the World*, “Stories are the most basic tool for connecting us to one another” (11). So here is my story.

I am in my mid-twenties, and in some way or another, I have spent 8 years of my life involved in higher education, as a student, as a student worker, and now as my career. When I look back at my own college search process, it was not too stressful, I was not overly engaged and I did not have a favorite school. Lacking a top school meant I applied to several different schools. My mentality was to see where I got in and then decide on a school. Rejections still hurt, but I never became too emotional over a denial letter. I ended up at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It is a historic liberal arts

school, which was a fine fit for someone who was unsure of their interests. I ended up studying environmental science and globalization studies. The courses seemed interesting, but I did not think much about the job I wanted post-graduation.

My sophomore year of college I applied for a tour guide position in the Admissions Office at Gettysburg. I worked as a tour guide for the rest of my college career. This job came easily to me; it was easy to talk about the college, my experiences as a student, and the experience of other students I knew. It almost felt like acting, you would “turn on” your tour guide persona and people seemed to enjoy their visits. I liked the excitement that came from providing a good tour and getting students, and families, excited about their future.

As a senior, I applied for an internship position in the Admissions Office. This internship would give me a heightened level of responsibility, as well as more insight into the inner-workings of an admissions department. I felt challenged, but accomplished in the intern position. I coordinated different projects, worked late hours, and created a bond with the full time employees in the office. It helped me realize that I was good at this type of role; I had good event planning and interpersonal skills, and I enjoyed the exciting nature of the work. I decided to apply for a summer position in the Gettysburg College Admissions Office due to the career realizations that I had during my internship.

This role was as a Summer Assistant, someone who would interview prospective students and work on small projects. This took place during the summer after I graduated from Gettysburg. I spent my time interviewing a surprising array of students. In my down time I applied to full time admissions jobs all across the country. I felt unsure of what to do with my two majors that I studied as an undergraduate. It seemed like there were too

many directions to choose from and I felt under qualified for most of them. Conversely, all of my years working in the admissions office made me feel very well prepared for a full time job in admissions work.

After sending out several applications, I began to have a series of phone and Skype interviews. A few of these opportunities led to in-person, interviews. One of these interviews was at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont. The interview went well, I used many of the skills I had honed as a tour guide and summer interviewer. I was offered the job soon after the interview. The appeal of Burlington and the prospect of my first fulltime job led me to accept the offer quite quickly. I began working at Champlain College on September 3, 2012. I worked at Champlain for 4 full years.

My role at Champlain shifted and morphed too many times to count. I did everything from event planning and marketing work, to supervising our student interns and moderating student panels. Our key roles in the admissions office were to travel and recruit students, give presentations on the College and our admissions process, and read prospective student applications. All of these different projects and roles taught me a lot about Champlain and admissions, but I found that I learned even more about myself. The college admissions process at a small school can be highly personal. College applications can often shed light on dark secrets and fragile stories.

The glow and success of gaining my first fulltime job began to fade after my first year and half of work. Around this same time, I began a Master's program at the University of Vermont. My program, a Master's of Education in Interdisciplinary Studies, caused me to analyze my job and my life in a new light. Combined with my

shift in mentality at my job, I found myself coming to realizations that I had not previously seen.

1.2 The Realizations And Self-Reflecting

As my job and graduate course work progressed, I began to see some flaws in higher education and some flaws in myself. It is an unfortunate habit to be intensely critical of yourself; I deeply analyze my thoughts and my actions. I try to make sense of them and establish reasoning behind them. For these reasons, maybe it is easy for me to be critical of others. It isn't something I am proud of, but I often find myself thinking critically about others - their actions, their beliefs, just about anything. While this may seem to be a poor trait, it is also what made me good at my job. I can be compassionate, but I am also a realist. These are skills that come in handy when reviewing college applications. You must find a balance between compassion and critical.

I seemed to find this balance quite quickly. My boss noted my strength as an application reader and would seek out my assistance for higher level reading responsibilities. By my second year at Champlain I was cross checking the applications of my colleagues, giving second opinions on harder applications. By my third year I made many of our final application decisions. Professionally, this was very impressive. I was gaining a high-level of responsibility and trust. This role only pushed my critical thoughts and cynicism further to the surface. Despite the leadership and respect that this role gave me within my team, I felt quickly jaded in my role.

Reading applications during those years I made some keen observations about the admissions process and the details that students would share in their applications. School counselors and parents of our prospective students also shared these details. There

seemed to be some repeatedly mentioned themes within applications, letters of recommendations, and phone calls and emails from students and parents. Several of these themes would also come up during our team meetings when we would discuss applicants as a group or talk about best practices.

One of the most repetitive themes, seen in every form of writing and communication noted above, is anxiety. Students certainly mention other health concerns, learning disabilities, or the big win their athletic team accomplished (we see that one A LOT). Despite all of these repeating themes, anxiety has always stuck with me the most. The reason behind my awareness on this theme, over others, came from my own struggle with anxiety. It impacts my personal life, my professional life, and my education. What might be most interesting is that I did not recognize my traits as traits of anxiety until I worked fulltime in a field where you are exposed to anxieties almost every day.

I began to realize that my nervous traits were something more. Coworkers suffering similar debilitating issues, and the essays I read and interactions I had with students suffering from anxiety, showed me that my traits weren't isolated or rare. The entire process of applying to college is riddled with anxiety. Each person involved in the process feels some level of anxiety, and for those already struggling with anxious tendencies - the result is heightened. This thesis, written in the style of Scholarly Personal Narrative, sheds light on how and why the college admissions process can cause anxiety.

1.3 Process - Scholarly Personal Narrative

One of my first introductions to Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) writing came from the book *Our Stories Matter* by Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray. In the introduction of the book, Nash and Viray describe this style by saying, "SPN is about giving yourself

permission to express your own voice in your own language; your own take on your own story in your own inimitable manner” (15). After reading this description of SPN writing, I was most intrigued by the “P” - the ability to write personally. The personal aspect of this style of writing instantly jumped out at me. While it did scare me a bit, I liked the idea of writing MY thoughts and MY stories. I found inspiration in Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, especially when she states, “Writing can be a pretty desperate endeavor, because it is about some of our deepest needs: our need to be visible, to be heard, our need to make sense of our lives, to wake up and grow and belong” (19). I learned that even a story that may seem small and insignificant to you could provide hope and awareness to others. Despite what academia tells us, there is value in personal stories. There have been many times that I found myself saying “my stories aren’t important, I haven’t faced much hardship. I haven’t been severely marginalized.” While these things still stand true, they do not mean that others won’t find a connection in my writing.

After reading the first half of Robert Nash’s *Me-Search and Re-Search* I was even more struck with this idea of personal writing, but this time I reflected more on the loss of the “me-voice” in higher education (56). As a college graduate it should be obvious, but I had never fully reflected on the fact that most of my academic writing consisted mainly of the thoughts of others with a hint of my own opinions. In contrast, *Our Stories Matter* implores readers to “Find your special sound and style, and you will find your story. Lose these, and you will continue to be silenced” (Nash and Viray 16). I had not realized that my voice was silenced throughout my education until I read those words. Reflecting on my college experience, I realized that my voice and style were often lost, or silenced.

For many, the perception is that college is about self-growth and personal exploration. “Education, in its most basic sense, prepares student to understand the self and the world. Traditionally, the college years offer students the time and resources necessary to learn how to understand one’s self on the journey into responsible adulthood” (Astin et al 30). This is a nice idea in theory, but if you think about it, the “natural” progression of a person’s writing is actually quite odd. When we first start learn to write, we are told to write about OUR favorite foods, OUR family members, what WE did over the summer vacation. As we move through grade school we continuously lose the freedom to write about ourselves, and our writing becomes more and more the research of others and their thoughts instead of our own. By the time we reach higher education, we are often writing papers where every other line requires a reference or quotation marks. What we learn in college courses is important, but it is not the sole thing that students should take away from their education, that is, if they even remember the information a few days later.

As Brené Brown writes in her book, *Daring Greatly*, “what we know matters, but who we are matters more” (14). I believe that many people spend their time in higher education trying to find their own voice and figure out who they are, but are often too busy studying the voices of others to really ever truly define their own. Robert Nash describes this education style in *Our Stories Matter* by saying, “knowledge in...knowledge out...knowledge forgotten” (26). It is a little sad to think that your personal stories are stifled, when many of us have so much to share. Instead, schools tend to fill our minds with knowledge that is soon forgotten, leaving students feeling a bit lost.

Sharing our own stories can often connect us more than the stories of people we have never met, seen, or even heard of.

While finding my “me-voice,” and using it in my writing, is something that I have done before, it is not something that comes naturally to me. I have always been the quiet observer, sometimes by choice, but sometimes because I am being stifled. In my family I often used to feel like my opinions and stories weren’t valued. This continued feeling caused me to believe it as truth, and I carried it with me through much of my life. I know it is not fully a truth because in the right setting, or if people ask the right question, I have plenty to say.

My mom once told me I really “came out of my shell” when my sister went to college. The truth behind that is that I was never in a shell. My sister’s loud and talkative demeanor simply created a glow that cast a shadow on anyone quieter. Once the shadow was gone, I was easier to see and easier to hear. I have chosen the SPN style of writing because I hope to work this metaphor into my work, by not letting my “me-voice” be overshadowed.

The following Scholarly Personal Narrative focuses on the relationship between anxiety and the college admissions process. Admission into the higher education system can be tedious. Those involved can feel like they are losing themselves in the process. Nash and Viray note, “Oppression, especially in higher education, is the *suppression* of the personal voice” (27). Through my own personal stories, and the stories of colleagues, students, and parents, I hope to provide insight for people struggling with anxiety, whether they are in the position of a young professional like myself or the position of a high school student or parent of a high school student. The writing will be sequential,

looking at myself in high school and analyzing my own college search process and my entry into the ages that qualify as my “quarter life.” I will parallel my personal stories and experiences with the experiences I see in my job, students who are the same age I was when I was looking at colleges, or looking for jobs. I want to create connection between these perspectives. I am inspired to write on this topic because of what Mary Pipher says in her book *Writing to Change the World*, “Good writing facilitates the making of connection in a way that inspires openheartedness, thinking, talking, and action...The way to promote social and economic justice is...by telling the truth, and by encouraging civil, and public discussion” (7).

This writing can be for just about anyone, since most people have experienced some level of anxiety in their life. It also acts as a resource for high school aged students and their parents. It will provide insight into the admissions process and shed light on what is going on “behind the scenes.” There is a growing amount of research and writing on these topics, but much of it loses the personal voice. As my SPN progresses, I hope to address an even more specific audience - the students and counselors that experience anxiety, and struggle to find solutions for these unsteady feelings. As more and more students pursue higher education, I believe that this will also be a universal theme. I am inspired by Anne Lamott’s words, “If something inside you is real, we will probably find it interesting, and it will probably be universal. So you might risk placing real emotion at the center of your work. Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write towards vulnerability” (226). I hope to share my truths and my vulnerability, in an effort to create a universal text. The end result of this writing will hopefully be a thought-provoking look at how anxiety impacts all parties involved in higher education admissions.

With the role of admissions counselor as my most recent profession, I find these themes even more intriguing. *Our Stories Matter* helped me to see how my work could help others. Nash and Viray use their book to show the “methodology of SPN for marginalize/ underrepresented/ previously “disappeared” students at all levels of higher education” (6). My writing could potentially help a student in their college process, it could help them do more for themselves; help them make their own decisions. Or help them to define themselves outside of their anxiety.

It is an interesting juxtaposition, writing about higher education in the Scholarly Personal Narrative Style. Until recently, this style was not accepted by the “academy” as scholarly work. This writing will look at the process of gaining entry into the higher education system via a system of writing that higher education does not fully recognize. My hope is that this piece can defray some of the skepticism that the academy puts on scholarly personal narrative. I hope this piece is universal, yet educational, all while being enjoyable and easy to read.

1.4 Methodology

In addition to writing in the SPN style, I will also be writing in a cyclical style, with the three main chapters following the four seasons of the year. The work of college admissions is extremely cyclical; each year repeats itself with a new set of students. For this reason, each section of this piece will have its own set of seasons. The theme for the section will then progress through each season, describing what changes at each point, the anxieties that arise, and the outcomes and solutions available.

Chapter 2 – The College Admissions Process: My Own Experience

2.1 Fall

It is difficult to look back on my own college search experience and not see it through the lens of a college admissions counselor. When I worked with visiting students or when their parents would ask me where I attended college, I would constantly think back to my own process. I had to analyze my own college search and my final college decision, and answer questions related to how and why I made those decisions, not just as a high school student, but also as a college admissions professional. Often visitors to our campus only saw me as an admissions representative, not as the confused high school student I once was, so my answers to their questions seemed thoughtful and professional. When I began my own college search, it was anything but thoughtful or professional.

As I mentioned, I have an older sister. She was my first introduction to the college search process. I was the younger sibling that tagged along on several college tours. I remember very little of these experiences, as college was not something that I was even beginning to think about. I was still in middle school at the time. Interestingly enough, the one detail that I do remember in her process, is my sister's visit to the University of Vermont campus. Do I remember the classrooms or the dining hall? No. All I remember is that my brother and I took our lacrosse sticks from the car and played catch while my sister went on the tour with my mom. The benefit of watching her navigate the steps, which I only realized later on, was that I became accustomed to the process. I knew what a college visit was and I knew I was expected to do them.

My junior year and the summer leading up to my senior year were spent visiting several colleges. I had the opportunity, although I did not see it as an incredible opportunity until I worked in admissions, to visit schools all over the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. My mom helped me figure out where to visit and would help me schedule the trips. I started broad and eventually began to narrow the search. The following section is a reflection on my own college search and selection process as a high school student, and the anxieties and questions that arose during my process.

2.1.1 Do I Know My Counselor's Name?

I began my senior year of high school having already visited most of the colleges I was interested in. The next step was figuring out the logistics: How do I apply? Where do I apply? When do I apply? These were anxiety-inducing questions. Luckily, they are questions that are often answered by your guidance counselor at your high school. The only problem was, I did not know my counselor's name. I did know where the guidance office was in my high school, but I definitely did not know who to speak with within that office. I now know that there are usually two types of students, those who know their guidance counselors very well or those who do not know them at all; there is rarely an in-between.

My first task was to find out whom I was supposed to speak with within the counseling office. After a good deal of nagging from my mom, I met with my counselor. Whose name I certainly do not remember. I do remember that my counselor did not seem very helpful or thoughtful in her counseling. I think many of us have heard stories along these lines, about a person who met with their guidance counselor and left feeling less sure than when they arrived. I often heard about people telling their counselors that they

were interested in nursing, so the counselor compiles a list of schools. When the student reviews the list, only one of the schools offers nursing. While it seems like I hear these anecdotes far too often, what is clear is that there is always a certain level of confusion during these student-counselor meetings. I certainly felt this way in my own meetings with my school counselor. Once I met with my counselor the questions began, and as a recent senior in high school, I did not always feel ready, or qualified, to answer those questions.

2.1.2 Better Question: Do I Know What I Want to Study?

It turned out that finding out my counselor's name was not going to be the only thing I needed to figure out during my first couple months of senior year. I also needed to figure out what I wanted to study. It felt foolish to choose a school without having a general sense of what I wanted to study. What if I ended up at a school that did not offer the programs I was interested in? From the start of my search process I mainly looked at liberal arts colleges, so their course offerings were rather similar. Since each school offered similar programs, choosing liberal arts colleges seemed like a safe bet and made me feel okay with being “undecided.” Although, undecided may have been my way of not taking the time to truly think about what I wanted to do or what I was good at. That in itself seemed like a big a task and could cause far too much anxiety if I spent too much time thinking about it. Dedicating time to this question would mean getting wrapped up in the “whats” and the “what ifs” that often accompany anxiety. So, “undecided” seemed safe and flexible. This kept my options open and meant I did not need to do deep research or think too much about where to apply. It also meant it was difficult to rule out any

schools. I continued to coast along with my list of visited schools that seemed more and more similar with each piece of college mail I received.

2.1.3 Parent's Questions: Why Won't You Apply Early Decision?

As you might have noticed, there seem to be a lot of questions. Everyone in the college search and application process has questions and they don't ever really stop. If anything, the number of questions only increases with each stage of the process. With the increase in questions, comes an increase in anxiety. For me, the anxiety stemmed from that fact that you were no longer wrestling with the questions you had in your head, now there were questions from your guidance counselor, your parents, your teachers, and your friends. Everyone seems to want to know what you're thinking, what your plans are, and why. My parents had questions, and while I was pretty independent in my process, they certainly still asked them. My mom was the driving force with the questions, especially since she previously helped my sister manage the process. She had more of an understanding of the process than I did, but like many high school students I did not believe that at the time. I wanted to act like I knew what I was doing, and I felt like the information that I was receiving was private, my parents did NOT need to know how or why I was making my decisions.

For my mom, one of her biggest questions, something she would not stop asking, was why I was not applying early decision to any schools. Early decision is an application option that allows students to apply early and find out their decision at an earlier date. For me, the only problem with early decision was the binding nature of choosing that deadline. If you apply early decision, and are accepted, you are expected to enroll in that college. This is a great option for students who have first choice school

because it allows for an early decision letter and means that your second semester of high school is free of college decision stress. Since I could not even begin to narrow my list down, it seemed impossible to pick a single top choice, and even more impossible to then bind myself to that school. In retrospect, it certainly would have been nice to eliminate the second semester of stress for my mom and myself. I wasn't thinking like that at the time. I was not really putting too much thought, or effort, into the process and I now know this was a way of actively avoiding the anxiety that comes with big decisions.

2.2 Winter

Senior year moved quickly, there was so much excitement around every event or decision. All of these things would be my last: my last field hockey season, my last Halloween with my high school friends. It always seemed like there was so little time, which made it hard to set priorities straight. Was it more important to spend as much time with my friends as possible? Or spend hours researching and applying to schools? Luckily, the winter season meant more time indoors, shorter days and longer evenings sitting at home working away on college planning and applying.

2.2.1 More Visits & More Lists

The winter of my senior year was spent making lists; written lists and mental lists, ones I could physically check off and others that rolled around my mind and kept me up at night. My lists were meant to organize the colleges, but also to remind myself to do certain application or financial aid related tasks. I eventually made a list of nearby schools that I wanted to interview at, an idea that was more my Mom's than my own. I set up a couple interviews in the early winter, sometimes I went alone and other times my Dad came with me. I don't remember being nervous about the interviews, I knew I had

plenty of things to share, whether it was the sports I played or the AP classes I was taking during my senior year. While I was not the one to initiate the idea of interviews, the act of doing them did play a role in finalizing the list of colleges I would finally apply to. Mom was not overly involved in my college process, but I now see and understand the access and support that she provided me. She walked a fine line of being helpful, supportive, and persuasive, while still allowing me to make my own decisions and own the decision that are made throughout the process.

With some helpful pushes, and not enough thoughtfulness on my part, I made a list of schools to apply to. Given the nature of most of my college visits, my list only contained small liberal arts colleges in the Northeast. It was a comfortable list with schools that fit my academic profile, and they all offered many of the same things: diverse course options, a beautiful campus, study abroad options, and fun campus life. This part seemed fun, I was receiving colorful and interesting mail from these colleges and I began getting excited about the opportunity to attend college in the very near future. It seemed like such a large step, I had decided on where to apply! The excitement quickly faded when I remember that the step in between this list making and my college acceptance was the actual application process.

2.2.2 Applying to Colleges

This is the dreaded step. I don't recall much excitement when I went through this part of the process and I do not see much today with the students I work with. Pieces of it can seem exciting, but overall the process is complicated and tedious. Along with figuring out how to afford college, the application process may be the most anxiety inducing of them all. There were so many steps, so many different applications and

supplemental applications, it made it hard to know if you completed everything, and completed it correctly.

My recollection of my own application process consists of many long hours sitting at my family's shared desktop computer in our living room. Every now and then my Mom or Dad would remind me that when they applied to college the application process was "much less complicated, but we did have to hand write everything and then mail it in!" While I was happy to not be hand writing several college essays, I honestly think I blacked out some of the process. It was stressful, annoying, and involved way too much self-analysis. I was being asked questions like, What do you hope to accomplish in college? How will you be a leader on our campus? These questions seemed very difficult for a person who could barely narrow down her list of schools to apply to, let alone figure out a college major during high school. Combine these anxiety-inducing questions with my Mom's persistence in proofreading my answers, I often felt as though it might be easier to not apply. Or to just apply to schools that didn't require an essay or any written answers. Now, when I read college essays and short answers responses that students submit to my college, I am always shocked by the amount of typos or extremely informal language that they chose to use. So quickly I forget how I tried to avoid parental proofreading.

I sat at our desktop computer for hours, usually doing work on college applications after dinner. It was winter, so the light would only last until about 4 PM. Sometimes I would sit at the computer and the darkness outside the adjacent window would convince me I had been working on applications for hours, when really it had only been a half hour or so. I worked hard to get everything done, well before the deadlines

that each school required, again with the help of persistent reminders from my Mom. I completed the process by January of my senior year, the small fraction of the year that I spent immersed in this process seemed much larger given the tediousness. While this seemed stressful, the next phase in the process brought on a different, and very unique, type of anxiety.

2.3 Spring

Once all of my applications were conveniently submitted online, there was a brief period of relief. I finished what you thought was the hardest part. I visited schools, I interviewed, I learned my guidance counselor's name, I filled out the applications, and I survived my Mom's nagging and proofreading. I felt like I made it! I finished up such an arduous process. I was relieved, even feeling celebratory, and then I realized that my applications were in, but I was not in. I had not been accepted yet, and I wouldn't know the outcome of my submitted applications for months.

2.3.1 Waiting Game

During the application process, sharing my poor math grades, my weaknesses, and my failures, seemed intimate and challenging. What I didn't anticipate was the challenge of waiting for decision letters to arrive. While I was able to submit my application online, I applied to colleges well before online admissions decisions became available. So, like most students who applied to colleges in every decade before me, I waited. I was usually the first one home at the end of any day, so I was the first to check the mail. My desire for privacy fulfilled. All of the college related mailings filtered directly through me. This is the time in the process where schools begin sending you even

more mail. They aren't sending their decision letters yet, but sending along information to get students excited about a school that may end up denying them.

Time seemed to move slowly during the beginning of the spring season, it just involved waiting. Your excitement, nervousness, and anxiety would take turns keeping you up at night. To my teenage self this seemed so painful and torturous. You begin to wonder if you made mistakes on your applications. My understanding of my anxiety was in its infancy at this time in my life, but I was beginning to get hung up on minute details that I had no control over. "The anxiety emerges when students and parents have their eyes and hearts set on a small range of elite colleges and universities, admission to which is highly competitive and, for most applicants, quite unpredictable" (Tierney). The uncertainty causes the anxiety. Had I misspelled the title on my college essay? Did my interview back in December not go as well as I thought? I did fumble over one of the questions. I tried to keep reminding myself that I didn't have a top choice school, so I shouldn't be so anxious. I just needed to get into a couple schools; I didn't need to get into every school. I didn't have a favorite! It didn't matter! I believed this. It was mostly true. If I didn't get into Lehigh, maybe I'd get into Lafayette, two very similar schools in the exact same area of Pennsylvania. I kept thinking about these potential outcomes over and over.

2.3.2 Comparisons with Others

The thought of not getting in was daunting, even if I tried to convince myself that it wasn't. It only became more daunting as others began to hear their decisions. While early applicants heard decisions as early as December, the vast majority of decision letters were sent out in March. Some schools had exact dates that they sent letters; others

gave more broad timeframes by saying things like, “mid-March” or “by the end of March at the latest.” These unclear timeframes caused confusion and frustration, especially when your friends and classmates began hearing decisions from schools.

You can’t help but compare yourself with others when you hear about their acceptance or denial letters. You compare their schools to the schools you applied to and try to decide if it is a stronger school. If they got in to Colgate, will I get in to Skidmore? You like to think that it works that easily, that your merits will be considered against your classmates, and if you are just as smart, or smarter, you will also get into the schools they were accepted into. You want to think that the system is just. As Michael Sandel writes in his book *Justice*, “To ask whether a society is just is to ask how it distributes the things we prize - income and wealth, duties and rights, powers and opportunities, offices and honors. A just society distributes these goods in the right way; it gives each person his or her due” (19). For my classmates and myself, the thing we prized was acceptance to our top colleges, and we expected that they would be given to those who deserved them. Attending a small high school only made this more challenging.

It was easy to find out what schools students were getting accepted into. You would randomly see people crying in the guidance office or shrieking into their cell phones when their parents called with good news. I remember trying to tell myself that I wouldn’t become upset with decisions; it wouldn’t be a big deal. Soon my own decisions started arriving in the mail. I became familiar with the fear of finding a small business sized envelope in my mailbox. That is what a denial letter looks like. It’s just a single piece of paper, folded up into a regular sized envelope. Each one reads about the same, the school tells you that they are sorry to inform you of this news and that the

competition was steep. Neither of these things make you feel better, and I realized I was wrong about not getting upset over denial letters. Rejection always hurts. You can try and pretend like it doesn't, even if it is rejection from a school that you were only somewhat interested in, it still hurts to find out that they do not want you to attend. You told them nearly everything about yourself, so it makes a denial feel quite personal.

Acceptance letters came in the form of packets, in envelopes the size of a folder. Inside these packets were colorful pictures and brochures, sometimes even a poster or a formal invitation to an admitted student event on campus. Buried within this colorful packet was an official acceptance letter and financial aid information, two things that seemed very unexciting in comparison to the rest of the contents.

2.3.3 Acceptance, Denials, and Decisions

The anxiety of denial and comparisons dwindled as my decision letters started to arrive in the mail. It was an exciting time, but still tinged with a sense of anxiety, not over where I didn't get in, but in regards to where I DID get in. It was all becoming very real; a decision would need to be made. And I needed to make that decision. Things began to feel very serious, not joyful or exciting. The fun excitement over getting to the mailbox first and opening up brightly designed welcome packets was replaced with a growing sense of dread. I kept asking myself what the right decision would be. I kept hearing how the decision of where to go would impact not just the next 4 years, but my whole path. This decision could, and would, completely change my life. That is a lot of pressure for a high school senior to handle, especially a high school senior who didn't have strong convictions on what she wanted to do or where she wanted to be.

Many schools offer events for accepted student during the spring, giving admitted students a chance to visit, or revisit, schools. For me, these visits were an opportunity to narrow down my options. I did not get accepted to every school I applied to, and others were becoming less appealing for a variety of reasons, like location, size, and even who else was attending from my high school. I narrowed my choice down to 2 specific schools. I attended their spring accepted student events and I made a decision. My decision came down to rather small details, but those details are what led me to choose Gettysburg College as the school I wanted to attend.

2.4 Summer

So much of your senior year of high school is a blur. If you decided to apply to colleges, you spend the majority of your year focusing on that process. There are so many steps, dates to remember, deadlines to worry about, and decisions to stress over. Once you decide on a school, and secure your place at that institution, you are able to freely enjoy the last month or so of your high school career. I sailed smoothly through that final month; it was full of celebrations with friends and excitement for summer plans.

For students attending college, June and July are a brief window of respite, a time to just revel in your achievements and celebrate your successful completion of high school. In 2008, I did just that. I finally felt relaxed, the questions and pressure from my parents and teachers lessened, and I can still clearly remember feeling carefree for the first time in a very long time.

2.4.1 Excitement

Finally feeling carefree meant there was also time to feel excited. It almost felt foreign, a feeling I had not experienced in a very long time. At this point I had been in the

search, application, and decision process for well over a year. The times during that year that were exciting, like visiting a new college campus or getting acceptance packets in the mail, were always tinged with a little bit of apprehension, confusion, and anxiety around all of the big decisions that still needed to be made. During June and July of 2008 that apprehension and anxiety took a brief, and much needed, hiatus. I had reached several sought after goals and was now feeling as though all of the hard work and frustrating times were now paying off.

2.4.2 Hesitation and Leaving Home

I only list June and July as the summer months that proved to be the most exciting for a good reason. August had an entirely different feeling. I was riding high; I graduated, I was accepted into college, and I was surrounded by all of my best friends throughout the beginning of the summer. When July shifted into August there was a more tangible turn as well. Friends began to attend orientation events, college roommates were assigned, and I began buying pieces for my dorm in preparation for packing up. While I graduated in June, August was the true shift from high school student to college student because this is when it all began to feel real.

Friends started to make new friends via their orientation events or online groups for first year classes. As someone who grew up in a small town, and attended a very small school, this was the first time that we felt separated, like we were growing apart. The reality of leaving for school and being on your own began setting in. This was exciting, it was what we had all been waiting for, but it also caused a great deal of hesitation. While I did not want to admit, or show, this hesitation, it was certainly felt. I

wasn't sure if I was ready, or if I would make friends, or like my roommate. There were so many unknowns, how could one not feel some apprehension?

One of the weirdest parts about departing for your first year of college is the fact that most of your friends are leaving at different times. People slowly fade away with goodbyes scattered here and there. It is drawn out, being reminded again and again that you are not going to see your closest friends for several months. After packing up my belongings and saying repeated goodbyes, I went off to school. I drove down to Pennsylvania with my parents (and a very full car).

I was overwhelmed during my first few weeks at school, I felt underprepared. I was anxious about every aspect of college, but especially making friends and doing well in rigorous classes. I can remember a very surprising amount of detail when I recall my first year of college. I remember more from that time than I do from much more recent years. I attribute this to how you are both so aware and unaware at the exact same time during your first year of college. I spent so much time thinking, rethinking, and overthinking independent decisions that I had not previously made on my own. It was my most thoughtful year of college. I was so conscious of my classes, grades, friends, and family. The one thing that I did not think about at all during my first year of college was forming a career path that would lead me to work in college admissions.

Chapter 3 - The College Admissions Process: My Perspective on Current Prospective Students

My liberal arts education led me in several different directions. I studied so many interesting things; I was involved in many clubs and felt a strong connection to my campus, community, and college friends. I managed to squeeze a lot out of my four years at Gettysburg. While I graduated with two majors in 2012, I did not pursue a career in either Environmental Studies or Globalization Studies. I was anxious about the majors I chose and felt as though I had spread myself too thin to feel focused on one specific area. Instead I chose to apply to be a college admissions counselor.

I began working in admissions at the start of my sophomore year. By the time I graduated, I felt skilled in this work, but I also felt supported. It had fostered strong mentor relationships. Something I had not felt as strongly in my majors or classes. The world of admissions was small, friendly, and supportive. My work at Gettysburg led to me to a full time role as an Assistant Director of Admissions at Champlain College.

In my work at both Gettysburg and Champlain, I interacted with prospective students and their families every single day. I watched them take on the admissions search and application process from a unique vantage point. As you read in the previous chapter, my college search was rather relaxed and not as thoughtful as it could have been. Then I found myself in a role that allowed me to work so closely with students and parents who were taking on these challenges and decisions. What follows is a reflection on the students and parents I have worked with during my time as an admissions counselor. The variety in types of students and parents is incredible and much of what I

say does not apply to every single person. These are reflections on the anxieties that I see in the prospective students and parents that I worked with, and how they have shifted in the few years between my own search process and now.

3.1 Fall

Students still follow a similar pattern as I did when I was looking at and applying to schools. There's still a cyclical nature that changes with each season. The spring of a student's junior year of high school continues to be a popular time to begin the college search process, as it was for me. Summer leading up to their senior year can be full of college visits and road trips to different areas where they are considering schools. The fall of senior year is a time to narrow down options and think about where to apply. While this timeline is quite similar to my own, there are some key differences in how students today are transitioning through each phase of the process.

3.1.1 What Has Changed?

At the start of my full time professional admissions role, only 5 years had passed since I was starting the application process myself. It is hard to believe that so much could change in 5 years, but there were two key factors that created such a vast sense of change. The first may be obvious: technology. Technology has changed drastically since I was in high school, and with it changed almost every step of the college search and application process. The second is less obvious; it is my own personal growth and ability to reflect. This is a bit abstract to explain, but it meant that when I started my admissions job I was looking at my students through a lens of my own experiences, before and during college. At the start of my job, I felt so detached from the prospective students; it was hard for me to see any similarities between these current high school

students and myself. The process felt different, as did the students, but as I progressed through my job and through my Master's program, I began to realize that a lot of the changes I saw were not necessarily changes, just things I had grown unsympathetic to in the time since I graduated high school.

3.1.2 The Role of The Internet

The internet certainly existed during my college search and application process, but things like social media and virtual campus tours were nearly non-existent. The explosion of social media outlets, and a heightened online presence of schools and educational organizations, in the past 5 years has made college information incredibly accessible. Not only do colleges have Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, and even Snapchat accounts, but higher education resources like the College Board and Princeton Review also have accounts on the same outlets. By strengthening their own websites, as well as their social media accounts, all of these organizations are able to connect with students and parents much more easily.

Students in my generation will recall reading *Princeton Review* books or the *Fiske Guide* to learn about colleges and college rankings. Each of these books were about 5 inches thick. While the books and rankings still exist, it is much more common that students use the *Princeton Review* or *Fiske* website. It is even more common that a student will simply do a Google search for “best colleges for _____ major” or “how to get into _____ college.” These searches will generate various links with lists of schools; quizzes that can help determine your best fit school, and endless tips on essays, interviews, and deadlines.

In addition to providing instant information on nearly any college-related topic, the internet can also generate a lot of anxiety. Students and parents alike are posting about their campus visits, their college application decisions, and their frustrations with procedures or particular schools. These schools are also posting on social media or sending numerous (and I mean *numerous*) emails to remind students to visit, or of upcoming deadlines, or even just saying “Hi” and providing a link to some cool videos of their college. Either way, it is an onslaught of information. It generates incredible anxiety to see all of this information being posted with more and more frequency as the cycles progress.

By the fall of their senior year many high school students have received college email and print mail for over 8 months. Depending on their level of access, they may have also done hundreds of online searches on their own, with friends, with parents, or with a school counselor (or all of the above). We are in an age where colleges and universities have moved past simply emailing and snail mailing content; they are tweeting, snapping, and most likely have students’ cell phone numbers, so they are also able to text. Texting polls as the preferred way for high school students to communicate (Newport 2). Given this statistic, it is logical for schools to want to use texting, but it also acts as yet another means of communication. The excessive information does not stop online, in your inbox, or in your mailbox.

3.1.3 The Campus Visit

Students and parents are still visiting campuses, just as I did with my mom prior to college. Fall continues to be a very popular time to visit or revisit, as students are finalizing their choices. The bones of a campus visit are still the same, it is an opportunity

to see the campus and hear the highlights of what it is like to be a student on that campus. You are able to meet at least a tour guide and potentially a college admissions counselor as well. That is for a basic visit, and no school aims to be basic anymore. People have become accustomed to fast and plentiful information. As such, the campus visit has become a very competitive way to set your institution apart from other schools. This can mean giving away merchandise or a seasonal snack, or sometimes something much more extreme, like offering a full calendar of different types of visits one can do on any given day. Students can sign up to meet a professor, shadow a class, meet with a student, and visit different labs and facilities that are not included on a regular tour. It is hard to say if this increase in options and extreme focus on visitor experience comes from colleges competing with each other or the demand from highly informed students and parents.

I believe it mainly comes from prospective students and parents being very informed and wanting the best for themselves or their child. We live in an Internet Age that allows us to very easily rate services and establishments, or pick our services and establishments based on the ratings provided by others. We expect fast information and fast service, but we also want it to be personalized. And so the modern college visit came to be. Not only are there opportunities for a very robust on campus visit, but most schools also offer a virtual tour on their website. While this tour option does not provide maple candies or an ice cream sandwich at the end, it does create access and visibility for students unable to get to campus.

3.1.4 The Role of Parents

I began my work in admissions in September, so the role of parents in the admissions process quickly became obvious. During the past 4 years, the fall was one of

the times when parents were most involved. Discussing the role of parents is tough for me, as I felt as though my own parents were minimally involved in my search and application process. In retrospect, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, I now see that they were much more involved than I, as an independent high school student, thought they were. They initiated my search, facilitated my visits, and asked the right questions to help push me through the process. They were supportive, and I was still able to feel independent.

I now work with a vast array of different parents, guardians, and other caregivers or mentors. You quickly learn that there is a spectrum of parenting styles and differing levels of involvement. On the far left of the spectrum you have entirely uninvolved parents. Through my work in admissions I spoke with, and read about, many students who were pushing through this process entirely on their own, with absolutely no support from their parents. Each circumstance was different, but I saw students whose parents could not, or would not, provide financial support, support for their education, and sometimes a complete lack of support for their child in general. As you move through the spectrum there are families who support their children, but are unfamiliar and even fearful of the higher education system. These students often need to be very independent, they really take charge of the process and you rarely hear from their parents or guardians. Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum you have the 50/50 scenario where you hear from the student and the parent the same amount, whether it is via emails or phone calls. They are both reaching out at a similar cadence. As you move to the right of the spectrum you start to lose the student and you hear more and more from only the parents or guardians. By the time you reach the farthest right end of the spectrum you are working

with a parent who may mention their child in their calls or emails, but you never hear from this student. Not once.

It isn't a secret; there are endless national news stories and jokes about helicopter moms or Velcro parents. Some time between my own search process and now, the level of involvement from parents shifted drastically to the right side of the spectrum. I believe this shift comes from anxiety. The parents that I spoke with on the far right side of the spectrum were almost always anxious about something. Nervousness permeated all of their voicemails and emails, a worried or accusatory tone about missing transcripts or upcoming deadlines. It is hard to fault parents for being nervous and anxious, but it is also hard to see students slip away from the process, leaving admissions counselors feeling like they do not know their applicants. Fall is a busy time for parental questions and concerns, with inboxes filling up and voice mailboxes reaching their limits. The amount of emails from parents tends to taper off in the coming season, but those that do email or call towards the end of fall, and into the winter, have a heightened level of anxiety.

3.2 Winter

Anxiety begins to build for students and parents during the winter, as confusing and strict deadlines approach. The hubbub of fall visits has died down, but the in-home and at-school portions of the process are just ramping up. Students must navigate their school's counseling office and figure out the policies for material deadlines and recommendation letters. Unsurprisingly, several of the processes are now online. This can be helpful for some students, but confusing for others. What can often be the most confusing is that there are now several different types of deadlines and applications. To

make things more complicated, each school tends to have slightly different deadlines and different policies in regards to their applications and deadlines.

3.2.1 Early Decision, Early Action, Fast Applications

There were a variety of deadline options when I applied, as I mentioned, my mom wanted me to apply early decision for the benefit of finding out early. For students applying to colleges now, there are not only different deadline options, but also many more application options. Early deadlines have not changed much since 2007, when I applied to colleges. What has changed is the way that these deadlines are talked about. While I may have been sheltered, these deadlines were presented to me as an opportunity to receive your decision early and compete against fewer students for acceptance. In Jacques Steinberg's *The Gatekeepers*, an exposé on the college admissions process, he notes that early deadlines "put a lot of pressure on a seventeen-year-old, and there was growing concern among both guidance counselors and parents that so many students were making premature decisions that they might regret later" (91). This was written in 2002 and still holds true today. The deadlines have been, and will continue to be, shady and unclear. Technology has only increased the conversation around the perceived importance of certain deadlines or applications.

With the increase in technology and access to the internet, there are now several sites that provide tips or comments pertaining to certain schools. Formerly accepted, denied, and enrolled students leave these comments, even parents of these students will post their thoughts and opinions. One of the most popular sites is called *College Confidential*. These sites allow families to hear "honest" feedback or observations about a school. There may be comments listed about a certain school and a certain major they

offer. The comments could come from students and parents and say definitive things, like when you need to apply to be able to get into that program or what to write your essay on if you want to get in. Some people see these sources as a helpful tool, but I am hesitant to call them honest because they are a space to share your own personal experience, but there is no guarantee that everyone will have that experience. For most parents and students, I see these types of sites creating more confusion and anxiety than promoting any sort of help or guidance.

There are already too many myths about early decision and early action, and now many colleges and universities are implementing new and different applications. There is sad truth in Marietta McCarthy's words, "We are crafty, always able to find new ways to complicate our lives" (14). We add new requirements and additional steps to an already lengthy process. The Common Application existed for many years before it had an online presence, but once it did go online, the number of institutions using it began to grow (Hoover). Its online presence grew so much that the paper version was discontinued in 2013 (Hoover). The Common App, as it is often referred to as, gave students the ability to apply to several colleges using a single application; it soon became the gold standard and most widely used application. Then colleges began adding supplemental applications and essays to the Common App. Next, like many things in the digital age, it eventually had competitors that were created based off of what the Common Application lacked.

Students are now faced with not only picking a preferred deadline in the winter, but also a preferred application. For example, most prospective Champlain College students receive an email alerting them that were selected for a highly sought after Dean's Select Application. Champlain College also accepts the Common Application and

a personal Champlain application that is a bit shorter than the Common App. Out of these three options students only need to submit one application, and once that is decided, they also have to choose from Champlain's three different deadlines. You probably need to read that sentence again, and that only goes to show how complicated and confusing the process is for today's applicants.

The process is overly complicated. Applicants today are facing many more decisions than previous applicants. In my experience working with these students, there seems to be a correlation between heightened levels of anxiety among students (and parents) and the number of application and deadline options that they can choose from. You can see the proof of anxiety in the essays and information that students begin to submit during this time period. Most applications require an essay and offer a space for students to share additional information that they feel is important to their application. Each year, more and more students choose to write about anxiety, breakdowns, or disorders. They disclose this information to show how they overcome challenges, or to explain why some grades or test scores are weak. I was always shocked at how frequently I would read applications that mentioned anxiety.

Winter is now a time where applicants do not feel any relief after deciding where they will apply because that decision is only followed by several more decisions about deadlines and applications. With each of these decisions there is excessive outreach in your mailbox and inbox to try and sway you one way or another. During this time period each year, I often work with parents and students that seem more stressed over which deadline to choose than when deciding between which school to attend come spring.

3.2.2 Everything is Electronic

Once a student does decide on a deadline and preferred application method, they submit all of their pieces online. While this seems convenient and centralized, it is also unnerving. You send out your personal and sometimes most confidential information, like grades and disciplinary infractions, into the abyss of the internet. Students and parents alike are consistently worried that things will not get received or will become lost somewhere, and they are not wrong to think so. *The College Board*, a company that administers the SAT, and offers advice for every step of the college process, has several popular web pages. One that shows the uncertainty of submitting everything online, is their web page entitled “Application Anxiety,” an entire page, with several links, that provides advice and insight to help students and parents feel less anxious about submitting their application and materials online (College Board). They remind students of a constant problem within the admissions system, stating, “Even if the college has written to the student saying that a document is missing, it's quite possible that the "missing" document simply hasn't been entered into the system yet” (College Board). Traditional snail mail can get lost, but there is some comfort in knowing that an actual person is handling your parcel. In the winter students and parents will call or email on a daily basis to confirm the arrival of their application pieces. Many times we do not have them, they do get lost or delayed in technological transit.

When there are deadlines and a student’s future at stake, tensions and emotions run high. Technology is in the process of creating beneficial advances for prospective students, but not necessarily fast enough. Many college search tools and resources like the *Common Application* or *The College Board*, experience failures and glitches. As each

company rolls out new features or new versions there are bound to be errors that delay scores or cause the loss of applications (Hoover). These glitches are in no way the fault of the prospective student, but they are the ones that feel the anxiety and any direct consequences that arise from these errors.

Since technology is responsible for the largest shifts in college admissions, there is a lot that can be said for these changes. There are certainly positive benefits for students, like access, stronger connections with admissions offices, and faster delivery of answers and information. The negative side shows the overwhelming and inundating effect that all of the new technologies have on students and parents. They walk a fine line between loving the benefits of technology and cursing the impersonal and unforgiving glitches that come with it.

3.2.3 Bribes & Breaking Points

As today's students continue to move through the winter season, they end up in two different scenarios. Those who applied early are beginning to receive decisions. Those who did not apply early begin to receive even more mail, and it tends to have a pretty persuasive tone. Final application deadlines usually occur in mid-January or early February. The middle and end of the winter are often seen as "crunch time" for students who have not yet submitted their applications. They receive many incentives and reminders to apply. Emails awarding them conditional scholarships or preferred access to housing if they apply by a certain date. During this time period I have had parents tell me that they are uncomfortable with the way we make out reach, it seems desperate or even close to bribery. And we are certainly aren't the only college that would partake in this practice of persuasion.

For students, this is a time when they reach a breaking point. They spent the fall and early winter being inundated with information on deadlines, applications, and invitations to visit. The colder and darker days of the winter do not help the matter. It simply seems like a depressing time. I can recall more than one student emailing me during the mid-winter to let me know how tired they are; you could sense the instability in their emails. More than any other season this is a time that students, parents, and teachers reach out to let admissions counselors know that they, or their student, are sick. They have the flu; they've been out of school for a week, or maybe missed a midterm due to mononucleosis. This level of communication may seem bizarre, but it is quite common. They are so worried about application decisions and what missing school or weaker grades may mean for a student's future that they will reach out to let us know of the smallest infraction or event that needs explanation. While this can certainly be attributed to the winter season and cold temperatures, it can also be a sign of overly stressed students who are anxiously losing sleep over applications and upcoming decisions.

3.3 Spring

For college applicants, spring is the light at the end of a dark and stressful winter. The majority of college decisions are sent during the late winter, so spring is a time for rejoicing or regrouping. Even if a student receives bad news from their first choice school, or all of the schools they applied to, spring is still a time to gather your thoughts and feel refreshed. In my experience as a counselor, this is a time when even a denied student has a renewed sense of vigor and urgency. Decisions push students to feel a certain way and take action towards achieving their academic goals.

3.3.1 Anticipation & Social Media

Not much has changed to the feelings associated with waiting for and finding out your decisions. There's still a huge sense of anticipation and anxiety. What has changed is how decisions are delivered, shared, and spread. Yet again, the internet plays a significant role in this portion of the process. Now it is much more likely that students will receive their decision via an email or an online portal on a school's website. A paper letter and acceptance packet usually follows, but it is often the standard to provide online decisions first. They are fastest, meaning they get into a student's hands much more quickly than a mailed packet. Faster is often seen as better in the eyes of colleges and universities. However, they lack the excitement and tangible nature of a letter.

The increasing differences in deadlines and how decisions arrive means that there can be significant gaps, a couple weeks or even several months, between hearing decisions from schools. Between decisions students are often joining the accepted student groups that colleges and universities will create on Facebook and other social media sites. These create a space for students to ask questions, watch videos about the school, and connect with other accepted students and current students. For colleges it is often a race to get decisions out for this particular reason. The faster the decisions are made the faster you began creating a community for your accepted students.

As mentioned previously, the negative aspects of social media still persist during this phase of the process. They are now heightened because the posts are now about college acceptance and enrollment decisions versus the choices students made on where to visit or apply. Today's students are posting on several social media outlets, announcing where they are accepted. This triggers several chain reactions. First, it creates anxiety for

other students who have not yet heard from that specific school. These students often tweet or email colleges to ask why they have not yet heard their decision. Second, it causes others to post about their own acceptance to that school or other schools. Many colleges and universities aggressively prompt students to post about their acceptance, they even provide branded hashtags and posters that accepted students could use in their posts. It is a cycle that simultaneously creates excitement and anxiety. These actions are not only associated with students, but parents and guardians as well. Some of my most vivid memories of acceptance or denial posts have come from parents. They are often even more excited, devastated, or frustrated, than their child.

3.3.2 Competition & Decisions

Spring is when admissions offices see the most internet and social media traffic. Their Facebook groups and Twitter feeds are filling up with questions and comments from students and parents. The end of the spring marks the time that decisions need to be made and enrollment becomes final. Students accepted to multiple schools see a lot of competition between their possible college choices. This competition is shown in few significant ways: social media, special mailings, and admitted student events. Just as colleges inundated students throughout the falls to visit and apply, they are now asked to join groups, view live broadcasts or videos, and attend specific events on campus.

Mailboxes and inboxes are once again being filled to their limits with incentives and invitations. You can tell that many students feel pride and excitement over this competition for their attention and enrollment. During this time period, emails from students and parents noting the special perks or scholarships that other schools offered are not at all uncommon. Champlain sent winter hats to students that signed up for the

first spring accepted student event in March. Sunglasses were sent to those who sign up for the second accepted student event, we crossed our fingers for sun and slightly warmer weather. Students waded through these gifts and persuasive emails as they decide if they want to attend admitted student events. These events are the final chance for colleges to display their assets, and for students to make their decisions. In my own search and decision process, the admitted student events played a key role. Today's students are treated to free giveaways, presentations by impressive local businesses with internship opportunities, as well as over the top food and activities. The small details at these events that helped me make my college decision in 2008 have multiplied in a way that makes it hard to compare what admitted student events were and what they are now.

Somehow, students today are able to take all the information from websites, posts on social media, and the details from overwhelming admitted student events and narrow down their decision to just one school. It is an incredible amount of information to boil down. The students I worked with each year expressed to me how difficult, and even painful, a decision could be. There are students who know all along where they want to go and once they get in their decision is made. Then there are others that are undecided and now have so many more aspects and details to consider. Students lose sleep over it; they write emails apologizing and explaining why they chose other schools. The sentiment behind that is very nice, having worked with many of them through the whole process, but it is striking how bad they feel writing these emails or making phone calls.

The internet, and especially increased use of email and social media, creates a closer bond between prospective students and admissions counselors. The bond is so strong, they have relied on their admissions counselors to answer their late night

questions and calm them down when something gets lost or delayed. Due to this bond, some students are genuinely saddened and scared to tell their admissions counselor that they are not attending. Of course the opposite can be said for students who do choose your school, they can be gracious and ecstatic. The internet and social media strengthened relationships, which then amplified the emotions that are felt at the end of the process.

3.4 Summer

For today's students there is still a sense of relief once decisions are made. They are excited to enjoy the end of their school year and kick off their summer vacation. However, the increase in internet use and activity on social media pulls them in a variety of different directions. Their friends, family, and senior year finals are no longer the main focus. There is rapid activity happening all across social media for colleges and their enrolled students. The anxieties that came throughout the application process have not entirely worn off.

Students almost immediately begin discussions about roommates, picking classes, meeting their advisor, and establishing what they can and can't bring to campus. These conversations happen much more quickly after the admitted student events, and with much more frequency, than they did in my own experience. Students today are so used to getting their information quickly, they are almost always plugged in to social media and internet activity. For them it feels natural to engage with this online community so quickly after making their final enrollment decision. Their summer has a very different tone and, based on frequency in posts, emails, and calls, seems much more consumed by

college thoughts. June and July no longer provide a space to relax or revel solely in your high school successes.

3.4.1 Parents & Paperwork

Summer is not a respite for parents and guardians either. Depending on where they fall on the parental spectrum, they are most likely on the hook to fill out several series of paperwork throughout the summer. The increase in paperwork comes from all sorts of new regulations, like FERPA and coverage requirements for student health insurance (Gilley and Gilley 17). It could be seamless at other institutions, but my experience with summer paperwork is confusing and full of red tape. The parents are unsure of what to fill out and how much information to share. They are most likely at the end of their rope, excited for their student to finally be headed to college, but also so tired of all the different steps it takes to get there. For students with uninvolved parents, this process is even more tedious, and in some cases impossible. They do not always have access to the information they need, which creates delays and missed deadlines.

Students are making their way through a checklist to submit housing forms and make choices about classes. Towards the end of July, right in the midst of all this summer paperwork, tuition bills for the upcoming school year are sent out. For many this squashes any relaxation or relief they felt about the process being “over.” In many cases this was the first step that actually makes it feel real. Making a (very sizeable) monetary commitment that locks their student into this decision for a year. At this point every summer, handfuls of students will cancel their enrollment. Some won’t give a reason, while others are honest about needing time off to work and make money, or even a last minute decision to attend a different institution. Either way, it is clear that the first billing

cycle is one of the first eye opening experiences that make it tangible and real. The letter in the mail is exciting, but there's no transaction of money at that time. The accepted student events are fun and over the top, but nothing makes it more real than paying a huge lump sum of money or staring at the amount of loans you just took out.

When financial aid letters are sent out with acceptance letters, some students decide well before the summer that a certain school will not work financially, and that can be really sad for a student and family. I can only assume that having to make that decision just one month before you are supposed to start your classes is devastating. Some students have other options, but others do not. They were blinded by the excitement and incentives. The reality of paying for college did not present itself until the last possible moment.

3.4.2 Students: Excitement & Hesitation

The end of the summer is still a time when students are feeling the uneasy mix of both excitement and hesitation. The difference for today's students is yet again, the internet. The nearly constant interactions with their future classmates and personnel at their college or university helps to quell fears and anxiety. The summer can be spent on social media, asking questions of their classmates, current students, and staff members that work in housing, counseling, and admissions. As Mary Pipher points out in her writing, "Blogs offer zero degrees of separation from people anywhere and everywhere. We can "hear" the voices of ordinary citizens reporting their stories" (221). By the time they are packed up and leaving home, many students do not feel that same scared feeling that I once felt. They already feel well connected to their classmates and their college. Social media has brought them together. Their questions are answered, and for many

students their high school friends and their families are much more accessible. They know they will still Snapchat and tweet back and forth with friends. Their parents or family members are a simple phone call, text, or Skype call away.

I wish students were a bit more disconnected. I believe feeling hesitant helps a student realize the importance and enormity of the step they are about to take. For once, in this instance, anxiety could be helpful; a tool that can help you think about the choices and freedoms you are about to face. With less technological connections and more anxiety, students would be forced to think about their independence and how they are going to tackle the upcoming changes in their life. Instead there is a security blanket that allows many students to feel as though they do not need to think about these things, let alone worry about them.

At Champlain there is a tradition that takes place during the first day of orientation. After spending the morning moving into their dorms, students and families gather for a barbecue and hear remarks from the Student Body President and the College President. The tradition is that The College President will ask families to say their goodbyes right then and there because the students will then join their orientation groups and go off to begin their college careers. It is all very public and brings many parents, and on looking faculty and staff, to tears. In the four short years that I was at Champlain, you could see a tangible shift in these interactions. Students were less and less upset about this sudden separation, by my 4th year there was almost no sense of anxiety coming from the students. There are probably several factors that created this shift, but I know that the newfound connectedness, whether good or bad, with their classmates and campus plays a

significant role. They are more and more aware of how easy it is to stay in touch with their family and friends who are about to leave them and head back home.

Chapter 4 - The College Admissions Process: Admissions Professionals

It is hard to write on this topic, from any perspective, without my current personal feelings on the topic becoming apparent. It is hard to not look at my own college search process and the process for today's students through my own lens as a college graduate and a college admissions counselor. While I tried my best to focus on what I see in their experience and their parents' experience, I know my own voice pushed through. In this section it will only be my voice and my opinions on my own work in admissions. These are impressions from my four years at a single institution. They are not indicative of every institution or every counselor's experience. I can only speak to my own experiences and the experiences of those who have confided in me.

The crux of this Scholarly Personal Narrative is anxiety, and the point of sharing three different perspectives is to show how anxiety permeates all sides of this process. Students often never realize the pressure and anxiety that admissions counselors feel on a nearly daily basis. Admissions counselors are detached from their own experience with the application process by at least 4 or 5 years, so we often forget the anxiety that we once felt as prospective students. In my experience, counselors can become calloused from hearing these same anxieties over and over again each year; financial aid issues, roommates, and lost application pieces. We become quickly jaded, growing cold to these repetitive questions, despite them being asked by a new person each time. We are not solely to blame; each party is most concerned with their own anxieties. That is human nature. My goal in sharing my personal anxieties is to show both sides of the story, to shed some light for students and parents. I want them to know that we are not sitting in

our offices, feeling powerful and confident while casually making “Yay” or “Nay” decisions.

4.1 Fall

The yearly journey of an admissions counselor follows the same cyclical nature of a student’s search and application process. Prospective students and counselors rely on each other through each seasonal step. It is a symbiotic relationship. In the fall, students and parents are looking for answers and campus tours, counselors are looking to meet new students and set up interviews. All the work on both sides is leading up to sending in an application. That is the role of admissions after all, to keep the college in business by bringing in the right number of applications and new students each year. Several parties and departments on a college campus play a role in bringing in a new class each year. There are marketing pieces specifically designed for each season, as well as professors meeting with students and families, but throughout it all - admissions is at the center. We are the focal point when it comes to bringing in a class, and the vast majority of that process begins in the fall season.

4.1.1 Planning & Prep

Our fall season really begins in August. As we prepare for students to come back to campus and our fall admissions travel to begin. Most counselors on my team had dual responsibilities during this timeframe. We were managing our on campus responsibilities, like planning tour guide orientation and training, while also analyzing data and planning fall travel. Admissions counselors travel for nearly 3 solid months throughout the fall. This travel is a critical piece of recruitment; it is a way to connect with students, parents, and school counselors face-to-face. As an admissions counselor, your fall travel consists

of visiting high schools, attending college fairs, conducting interviews, and planning and hosting regional events. All of this travel is based off of goals and data. Our goals shifted each year, but were usually a defined number of desired applications and enrolled students from each of your territories. Territories were groups of states split up amongst our team of counselors. You were responsible for reaching the goals in your territories and you would do so by planning very thoughtful and data-driven travel.

The data we used would come from our own databases, as well as companies like *The College Board*. Counselors search through years of data that will show high schools where we get a lot of applications each year and areas where we could grow. Through this data we map out a course that will take us through each of our states, hitting as many key high schools and college fairs as possible. My territories shifted throughout my 4 years as a counselor, I started out with 2 states, which eventually grew to over 10 different states. My travel plan would evolve throughout August and the beginning of September as I called and emailed back and forth with several schools and students. Schools would often only have availability on a certain date and time, which always threw a wrench into planning. It was much like creating a puzzle, but each piece is blank. You begin writing on the pieces as you put them together, so you must constantly shift the pieces around. The hope is that by September your puzzle is put together cleanly, with smooth edges and 4 defined corners. In reality, it usually end up with jagged edges and a few pieces on the sidelines that just won't fit in. It shows a wonky roadmap that can include 130 high school visits, 50 college fairs, 10 independent counselor meetings, 4 regional events, and 40 individual interviews.

4.1.2 Hotel, Motel, Holiday Inn

As counselors work through these pieced together roadmaps, they rent several cars, drive thousands of miles, and often take multiple flights back and forth across the country. Brené Brown in her book, *Daring Greatly*, states: “I have found that the most difficult and most rewarding challenge...is how to be both a map maker and a traveler” (16). During fall travel season, this resonated with me on a literal and philosophical level. You are simultaneously creating your path and walking on it as you create. The travel logistics alone can create anxiety. There are so many details to consider, reservations to make, and meetings to keep organized. The anxiety then multiplies when these logistics are combined with an extremely hectic daily schedule that is timed down to the minute.

High school students take time out of their school day to meet with college representatives. More and more schools are limiting these interactions so that students miss less class time, which means the time we do spend together is brief, but must be full of fast information. Your schedule is slave to the class period schedule where the bell usually rings at obscure times like 10:56 AM and 12:18 PM. You fill your day with upwards of 4 or 5 school visits, zipping in between each location to make sure you arrive early. Nothing is more frowned upon than arriving late to a visit; it demonstrates a lack of respect for the school’s time and sheds a negative light on your institution. The pressure to be on time often means waking up several hours earlier than usual, driving erratically, and skipping breakfast or lunch, or maybe both.

After your visits for the day there is hopefully time to grab some food before heading to your evening college fair or interview. At the college fair about 100 counselors from other colleges and universities surround you. We all have common goals

and strategies to reach those goals, and “though we parade about in different bodies, we all know salty tears, anxious hearts, drained spirits, and weary footsteps” (McCarty 134). Each counselor has had a similar whirlwind week, some feed off of the excited energy of the fair and others show their exhaustion on their faces. Despite these differences, we all know the mental and physical exhaustion that comes from recruitment travel.

You will most likely wrap up your day eating alone in a restaurant or ordering take out and eating alone in your hotel room. Neither option is desirable. Eating in a restaurant comes with weird looks from other patrons and misguided pity from your waitress who thinks you were stood up by a date. Your other option is to eat in the space that you are about to sleep in, which is depressing and leaves your small hotel room smelling like whatever your dinner was that night. You fall asleep in an unfamiliar bed with the sounds of strangers walking by your door or snoring on the other side of the wall.

It is a strange, and often depressing, lifestyle for several reasons. The solitary nature is a nice break at first, it gives you time to think deeply, or enjoy your guilty pleasure podcasts while alone in the car. After only a week or so of travel the aloneness becomes a little scary. As a woman, traveling alone for an extended amount of time can become very uncomfortable. You are aware of the risks that come with being a solitary woman eating at a restaurant and then walking alone to her car in a dark parking lot. Or the risks that come with a hotel manager saying your room number out loud as he hands you your key in front of other guests. You become accustomed to uncomfortable comments from men asking about your travels, but you also consider carrying pepper spray in your purse. I once returned to my rental car, which was parked in front of children’s museum,

to find that the rear windows were smashed and many of my belongings were stolen. It was dark, counselors will work until 9 or even 10 PM most nights in the fall, and I waited for over an hour for a police officer to arrive. Incidents like that remind you how unsafe solitary travel can be.

I fell into several bad habits during each fall travel season. Fresh and healthy food that falls within your allotted daily budget, and time schedule, was hard to find. During my four years as a counselor our daily stipend for food was \$40.00, which in many locations was not enough for 3 square meals a day, let alone snacks or beverages. It was a treat and personal pleasure to research local restaurants and dishes that I could afford to have a couple times a week, but this sometimes meant skipping breakfast or buying very cheap food all day to stay within my limited food budget. This is a known problem; every time I attended a professional admissions conference there was always a sessions on how to stay healthy during fall recruitment travel. Despite recognizing this issue, these sessions provided suggestions that were often unrealistic, require more free time than most counselors have in a day, or assume you have a higher food budget. I gained weight each fall; I felt tired and dehydrated everyday. Drinking water was dangerous with such a tight schedule each day because of the number of bathroom stops it would require.

Our budget for nightly accommodations was \$180, which in some areas meant lower end hotels or hotels in bad areas. My sleep habits suffered from the constant change in location and beds. The unfamiliar hotel sounds would keep me up or wake me up with a start. I was bitten by bed bugs on two occasions. The bed bugs created some of my worst travel anxiety. I imagined throwing away my luggage and spending money on

special soap; I worried that they would infest my apartment, all while insanely scratching my entire body while driving.

By my second travel season I started to take sleeping pills almost every night to help me get to sleep. Without them I would be up most of the night feeling anxious. I was in a profession that required an upbeat and energetic personality; I was expected to meet with several people throughout each busy day. The expectations and the lifestyle do not match up. Fall travel is a tough way to begin the admissions cycle each year. Many counselors run themselves ragged during their three months on the road and then find themselves with no time to recover.

4.1.3 Working Remotely

As counselors are traveling all across the country, meeting with schools and students, the work back on campus and in their inboxes does not cease. At the end of a busy travel day, after checking into your hotel in the late evening, there are a day's worth of emails and voicemails to respond to. In Chapter 3, I mentioned that the fall is one of the busiest times for emails and phone calls as students and parents are scheduling visits and figuring out where, how, and when to apply. In the fall, the late hours of the night are spent responding to these emails from prospective parties, but also emails from your boss, your colleagues, and your student workers.

Being on the road does not slow your on-campus responsibilities. You are still expected to edit marketing pieces, run reports for your boss, and, in my case, manage my student interns. The intern program was something I started at Champlain, having been an admissions intern myself. I went through a rigorous interviewing and hiring process, asking for nominations from professors and staff members. The role of the interns

required a lot of leadership and maturity. My interns were independent each fall, but still required scheduling, mentoring, and approval of hours, time off, and sick days. We would call, text, and email each other every day to make sure that the intern team ran smoothly. Being away from them during 3 months out of their 4-month internship was a challenge. I constantly beat myself up, feeling anxious about what they thought of me as a boss. I tried to make myself available and feel connected while balancing my travel and my work with prospective students.

Many counselors feel this way in the fall, they are drained from the daily travel, but expected to be 100% engaged with their on-campus responsibilities at the same time. As McCarty notes, “Many pride themselves on their ability to do many things at once even though none are done especially well, neither thoroughly nor attentively” (2). During this time of year it is nearly impossible to keep tabs on every responsibility and task, and certainly impossible to do them all well. There is a lot of talk about burnout within the counseling community; it is something that is talked about as an expectation, not a possibility. Counselors will reach a breaking point where they cannot do both their travel job and their on-campus job at the same time. The breaking point can come in all forms, for me it meant needing down time to recuperate mentally.

The expectation within my department was to come back to your office if your travel wrapped up before the end of the day, but if I returned from travel after 2 PM I would usually go home. If my director were to know this it would not necessarily pose a problem, but it would be frowned upon if this became a habit for multiple counselors in our office. I needed those hours. I would go home, lie in my own bed, and allow my interns, coworkers and boss to assume I was still traveling and thus not responding to

emails or calls. I would use these few hours to not think about working remotely, or hotel beds, or the fact that I would have to get up in two days and head out for another week of travel.

4.2 Winter

When counselors return from their fall travel there are already applications waiting to be read. There is not a gradual transition to being back in the office all day, everyday. You go from being in 10 different places each day to suddenly sitting back at your desk all day. By the end of the travel season, most counselors are ready for the ease and routine that comes with being in the same place each day. You feel as though you can really focus on your on-campus tasks and stay caught up on email. The cyclical nature feels like it is paying off, you are finally getting a chance to feel relaxed and immobile (in a good way).

4.2.1 Grades & Goals

The transition from fall into winter is always a time to assess your territory goals. I took it as a time to assess my personal goals as well. Applications were already pouring in so it was easy to see if you were meeting your numbers for your territories. If you were meeting your goals it was easy to give yourself a pat on the back and feel as though your travel was successful. In reality, many of the applications numbers are completely by chance or by factors outside of our control, like high school enrollment numbers in certain areas during certain years. Well-planned travel can help your numbers, but so much of it is out of your hands.

When your numbers are looking like they will be below your expected goals, it is somehow forgotten that so much of this is not within our control. It was, instead, an

opportunity to be hard on yourself over the potential lack of effort you put into your travel. It could also be an opportunity to hear negative feedback from your boss about how or why your numbers were low. While it is important to have goals within your work, it seems unethical to have these numeric goals that so clearly translate into a student. Counselors do intricate work, walking a fine line of giving helpful and heartfelt guidance to prospective students while also making sure they are persuading enough students to apply. Numeric goals take out the human touch that so many schools pen into the mission statement of their admissions office. Your fall travel converts into a set of numbers and it becomes harder to see the unique and bright students you met within these numbers and applications you see before you.

The beginning of winter is a time when I would assess my own personal goals, like happiness, success, and mental wellbeing. I usually balanced at least one or two graduate courses during my fall travel. It was never simple and often meant more stress and lack of sleep while traveling every week. There were several other members of my counseling team that were also pursuing a Master's degree. We commiserated over the extra time we needed during travel to keep afloat in our respective programs. Returning to the office in the winter was a time to reflect and figure out if it was all worth it. It usually felt like too much of a whirlwind, leaving me to wonder if I was doing the right thing by working full time and going to school part time. I would ask myself if I felt happy and if I felt successful, usually my answers were "no." It all seemed like too much and each decision was rushed. The bleakness of winter would always have me wondering if I was making the right decisions. Eventually I remind myself how unique it was to be in school and working at the same time. It meant I could instantly apply my learning.

4.2.2 Ethical Mishaps & Early Decision

Counselors spend the fall selling their college or university to students. They talk about their clubs, their professors, and their facilities. Counselors also spend a lot of time promoting early decision and other early deadlines, as they are an opportunity for colleges to lock in applicants. If more students apply early, college will not need to enroll as many students later on. This means less worrying for an institution, and can even mean lower acceptance rates and selectivity later on. The ethics behind this practice never sat well with me. It created a moral dilemma, as did lots of aspects of “selling” an institution.

In her book *Ethical Issues in Professional Life*, Joan Callahan describes these instances by saying, “Moral issues are, roughly, those issues which raise *normative* questions about the rights and welfare of persons...and about the character of the agent, in particular, about the kinds of persons we should strive to become” (6). How and when a student applies is a very personal decision, the slyness used by colleges to push these deadlines creates what I call “ethical mishaps.” While I did not always agree with this process, I tried to remind myself, “Life in democratic societies is rife with disagreements about right and wrong, justice, and injustice” (Sandel 27). Even if justice and injustice were always going to be present in the process, I wanted to be on the side of justice and right. Counselors make poor ethical decisions when working with students who should not apply early, but still do. Later on these situations become a mishap because the student, parent, or school counselors wasn’t aware of the early decisions guidelines or the cost of the college.

The winter months seems to be full of ethical issues. It is the time that students and parents are fumbling over the various deadlines and applications, and then counselors are reading these very applications. I understood that “the very concept one has of one’s role as a professional tends to shape one’s professional ethics” (Callahan 26). There was so much room for error and misunderstandings. I always felt torn between what was right in my eyes and what was right in the eyes of my office and department. My decisions would shape my role, and how I viewed my role within the system of the college.

4.2.3 Reading & Sleep Retainers

What was right for my department was to accept academically strong students, but also focus on goals like racial diversity, female enrollment, and geographic diversity. Each year there was a laundry list of expectations for the class, more goals to reach, more students that check off the boxes we needed filled. Reading applications meant making quick decisions on students and commenting on the most vulnerable and private aspects of their lives. Was it right to deny the student who bounced through foster care and struggled to keep their grades up? It is against the law to deny someone based on a disability or learning difference, but what if their ADD or severe anxiety kept them from doing well on the SAT? Nearly every day in the winter, a counselor will read an essay on mental health, most likely anxiety. Students share this information more and more freely. In just my four years as a counselor, there was a notable increase in students writing essays on anxiety.

For me, as someone also struggling with their own mental health, I felt a connection to these writers. I could hear Lamott’s words echoing in my head as I read their essays, “When people shine a light on their monster, we find out how similar most

of our monsters are” (198). We were wrestling with the same struggles, my applicants and I. I saw myself in their applications, in their essays. It was hard to face their stories, I considered turning away from them. Pretending that I did not see the student behind them or the similarities in our stories. As Mary Pipher writes, “Once the concept of otherness takes root, the unimaginable becomes possible. We don’t want to look at the faces of the homeless as we walk past them; when we do, they become people and it becomes harder to keep walking” (6). I had to keep reading, I could not get too bogged down in their stories and their emotions, but I did not want to pretend like they did not exist, like their was not a person behind that story.

This time of year always became emotionally draining, spending months saying yes and no to students based on their inability to perform in stressful situations or their access to SAT prep and several extracurricular activities. You are once again struck with ethical mishaps and struggle with hard decisions. So many decisions made this time of year are for the greater good of the college, and not for your own moral interests or better judgment. You wonder admitting a legacy student, whose parent(s) attended your school, just because attendance seems to be a family tradition and this would build a stronger community for the college. In *Justice*, Michael Sandel writes on college acceptance by saying, “consider what universities call ‘development admits’ - applicants who are not children of alumni but who have wealthy parents able to make a sizeable financial contribution to the school. Many universities admit such students even if their grades and test scores are not as high as would otherwise be required” (181). These scenarios caused me to wrestle with my own morals and the morals of college institutions.

The rule within the Champlain Admission Office was to read 50 applications each day, which meant spending only 10.2 minutes on each application, and that is if you skipped lunch and ignored all of your other office responsibilities that day. There was still an expectation to respond to all of your emails and voicemails, as well as maintain your on-campus role of managing students and giving daily information sessions. With all of these commitments it either meant spending less than 5 minutes on each application or working very long hours to get everything accomplished. Most people in this line of work are compassionate and got into their role because they loved working with students and helping them achieve their goals. So we usually ended up working late. To put our goals into perspective, Jacques Steinberg interviewed several admissions counselors when he did research for *The Gatekeepers*. One of his interviewees “would read close to fifteen hundred applications that winter, devoting at least twenty minutes to each, and sometimes more than an hour. On average, he would spend upward of twelve hours a day, six days a week, just reading...he could process as many as thirty applications in a day” (120). Again, the work for his book was done in 2002, we at Champlain, and many other schools, are now expected to read several more applications in the same amount of time.

Depending on the number of applications coming in, and the reading goals that needed to be achieved, there would be several weeks in a row where you would work until 9 or 10 PM most days. It is hard to say whether spending 5 well-rested minutes on an application or 10+ bleary eyed minutes is better, but it certainly felt better to give students the time they deserved. It always harped on me that students would spend several months working on their applications and some counselors could skim over them

in just a couple minutes. These counselors were able to detach the student from their application. I feared this dehumanization, “it impairs the mind’s perception of other people as people like us, rendering them instead as blurry, restrained, and even destroyed” (Adams and Balfour xi). It seemed like a disservice to the students who spent several late nights writing college essays, editing and re-editing, or working their entire high school careers to build a high quality resume of activities and skills.

In my second year as a counselor I was given the opportunity to do a higher level of reading. It meant reading more applications and making final decisions on many of the ones that I read. Professionally it was an incredible role to be given after only one year in the role. It was attributed to how devoted I was to reading, how thorough I could be while still being timely. I was praised for being able to buckle down and get work done without complaining or getting overwhelmed. But I was overwhelmed; I just was skilled at hiding it. The stress grew and the anxiety of decision-making would keep me up at night. When I did sleep I was restless and woke up finding I had kept my jaw clenched all night, I somehow continued to be tense even while I slept. I would have jaw pain throughout the day from clenching my teeth all night. The stress and pain eventually became too much. After a month of pain I went to go see my dentist. He diagnosed me with TMJ, which was being caused by the clenching. He molded me a \$300 night retainer and instructed me to wear it to sleep each night.

The retainer helped a bit with the pain, although it did not stop me from clenching my teeth or feeling anxious all of the time. At one point that winter I told a coworker, who had worked in admissions for several more years than me, that the stress of reading in the winter had forced me to get a night retainer. She looked at me wide eyed and said,

“ME TOO.” A few years prior she had one made around this same time of the year. There are many professions that impact your health in a whole host of horrible ways, ways that are much more painful and persistent than a sore jaw. Never the less, it was not what I expected when I went into this role straight out of college, and I was not the only one experiencing it.

4.3 Spring

A hectic fall abruptly transitions into an emotionally exhausting winter, which then turns into the most complicated season: spring. Winter and spring have much more fluid transition than the sudden switch from fall into winter. Application reading spills into the spring months when decisions are beginning to go out and accepted students start visiting campus. At this same time, juniors in high school are also kicking off their college searches, as I did during the spring break of my junior year. This means that counselors are back on the road attending college fairs and visiting high schools to connect with the junior population of students. There is so much happening in the spring that it brings a new excitement after a repetitive winter of reading applications. The variety of events going on also makes it really challenging to find the energy to keep going. On any given day in the spring you could read 20 applications, spend an hour chatting with an accepted student about financial aid or course offerings, give a presentation to juniors and their parents, and then call back several angry parents who are upset with their student’s denial or financial aid package.

4.3.1 Hard Conversations

Spring is filled with many different emotions. Some students are excited; some are confused, while others are very disappointed or frustrated. I can still remember

students from each of my 4 years that stuck out in the spring. There were students from the West Coast that I worked with for almost two years who called to tell me, in a shaky voice, that they would not be attending. Or the student from Maine who said we were her first choice since 9th grade. She was so excited to get accepted that she called me crying. Then her financial aid package arrived and things took a very negative turn. Her family was not going to be able to make it work even after working back and forth our financial aid office. The tough decisions that were made over applications all winter were now coming to fruition. You wrestle with so many questions. For me I was always frustrated by one recurring question, Should we accept a well qualified student if it is very clear that we will not be able to help them afford our tuition? I realize that sometimes “Acting morally means acting out of duty - for the sake of the moral law” (Sandel 123). This would rattle around my head all winter, culminating in the spring with hard conversations.

The conversations that you have with students and parents wear on you. Parents tell you things that they wouldn't even tell their closest friends. I've had parents who tell me about a recent affair, divorce, or even death in their family. There are so many different things that can impact a student's financial circumstances and their eventual college decision. In fewer cases, for parents who fall on the left side of the spectrum, you hear directly from the student. These conversations are even harder. I worked with students who had to tell me that their father just passed away so they need more time to work and earn the money to pay their deposit. Or more than one student who let me know they are actually homeless so I'll need to call them back at the number of the shelter they are staying at.

In this profession you can't help but become attached to so many of the students you work with, even those you have never met, but submit the most heartfelt essay and send you thoughtful emails. The spring is a time when you can both revel in their excitement and accomplishments and also hang up the phone and cry after you hear the trauma that is keeping them from attending college. The phrase "a rollercoaster of emotion" must have been coined in an admissions office during the spring season. The hard conversations that you have with students and parents can cancel out a lot of the excitement that takes place during this time of the year. After an emotional and sometimes depressing winter, it is easy to find yourself falling into a dark place. It isn't easy to remind yourself that so many of these scenarios and situations are out of your control. You can't help but feel a little responsible, as you were the one who led many students down this path and helped them get to this spring season.

4.3.2 Therapy Sessions

For 2 of the 4 spring seasons I spent as an admissions counselor I felt like I was reaching some sort of horrible breaking point. I was always anxious and for 6 months I did not get near enough sleep. I felt really unstable. During both of those years I went through the arduous process of finding a therapist to talk to. At first I did not want to admit to a problem, it seemed like I could push through it if I ignored it. I thought of the words that Adams and Balfour use in their book *Unmasking Administrative Evil*, "When evil really confronts us, we may notice no more than a blur in the side-view mirror, a gentle nudge, or a momentary reflection in our celebratory glass held high. Evil undoes us because its presence is subtle and disguised. It is a pervasive perturbation of the human condition" (ix). For me, the evil I was experiencing was anxiety, and it slowly crept into

my life more and more until I could no longer consider it an annoyance or passing phase. I felt like I was facing something that I could not face or solve on my own. I was beginning to understand the phrase, “spiraling out of control.”

Finding a therapist in Vermont isn’t hard, but finding one who can schedule an appointment with you within the next month is nearly impossible. Counselors continue to travel in the spring and are often in and out of the office for a month or two. It seemed impossible to find a time to attend therapy sessions, but at the same time the addition of more work travel only worsened my anxiety. I was back to sleeping in strange hotel beds each night, balancing on-campus spring activities with college fairs and conferences all over the country.

The process of calling my insurance company, and playing phone tag with various offices and doctors was only adding to the problem. Spring in admissions is already hectic and emotional, finding the time to make these calls was not easy. Once I was able to find a doctor with availability I also needed to find a day that I could actually take some time off to attend the appointment. Going to therapy was really odd; I had never experienced a doctor's appointment like that, where you just talk. My sessions usually consisted of my therapist asking a few questions and me talking the majority of the time. I cried frequently and shared how I was feeling and what was making we feel that way. We talked about work, my childhood, and my goals. This is where I was finally, and professionally, diagnosed with anxiety. I struggled with this issue for most of my life, but had only recently realized that it was anxiety, not just a fear of public speaking, an overactive imagination, or an inability to sleep soundly.

These sessions were a good emotional release. I usually left feeling refreshed and much less anxious. It was a nice opportunity to just talk and not feel like you were bothering someone with your problems or looking weak or unprofessional. As a recent college grad that is often how I felt. I was new to a city and did not have many close friends that I wanted to unload these feelings on. At work I tried to keep it all hidden because my tough and ambitious exterior was helping me get ahead within my team and my career. There weren't many spaces where it felt okay to have these conversations without negative implications or associations.

After two years of multiple therapy sessions each spring I began to feel better, but I also felt less of a connection with my therapist. It was getting expensive and I felt as though she was not really helping me in the ways I felt I needed help. Talking was great, but I wanted practical tools that could help me overcome or work through some of the issues I was facing. I stopped going to therapy with the intention of taking a break and looking for a new therapist. A year has passed and I have yet to move forward on this goal, but I have moved forward in how I help myself confront anxious feelings and actions.

4.3.3 Finding Solace in Social Media

Similar to today's college applicants, counselors can also find relief in like-minded people online. When therapy was not available, several different social media outlets were helpful tools in creating a space to share thoughts and feelings or simply commiserate with others who are experiencing the same things. One of the most useful tools in this area was a private Facebook page dedicated to those in the counseling profession, both on the college and high school side. People use the space to share

articles, talk through frustrations, and ask questions. The group grew during the time I was a part of it, but the counseling community is surprisingly small. It was great to hear others sharing their own issues, which were often similar to the issues we were facing in our office. People were able to comment on each post sharing their thoughts and feelings. It proved to be a quick way to get answers or opinions on a variety of issues. It also kept me engaged with a like-minded community. I became a part of this group after my therapy sessions, so it acted as a replacement to therapy. I rarely posted or engaged in the conversations, for me it was comforting to simply see the community discuss topics and support one another.

Social media also helped me stay connected with close friends from college and high school. I was able to send them messages randomly during the workday if I was feeling really frustrated or fed up. It provided an outlet after work to be able to video chat with familiar faces that made me laugh and reminded me of all of our happy college memories. Even mindlessly scrolling through Instagram or Snapchat, laughing at funny photos or drooling over incredible pictures of food, gave a brief break from thinking about work conversations or graduate school homework.

4.3.4 Finding Anxiety in Social Media

There was also a downside to social media. It is a tool that can make you feel connected, but once turned off can make you feel more alone than you felt before. It gives you a false sense of connection. As counselors, we also had access to all of the different social media tools that prospective, accepted, and denied students and their parents had access to. We could read all of the negative things being said about the college, our financial aid, or even our counseling staff. The internet is a space where

people can very freely speak their mind and often face no consequences. Some of the harshest things I have ever heard about myself, or the work that I do, came from students and parents posting online.

Even the counselor Facebook page could become a negative space. It could very quickly fill up with complaints and the same complaints would be rehashed again and again. The similarity in problems and the lack of good solutions among a group of nearly 10,000 people was infuriating at times. How could one industry be so fraught with ethical issues and confusion? The same social media and internet connection that allowed me to catch up with friends after work and feel close to happy memories also kept me connected to negative counselor posts, angry work emails, and my own colleagues. Gone are the days of going home and unplugging from work. Admissions is a social realm, meaning I became Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat friends with my coworkers within just days of meeting them. Social media was supposed to be an escape, but often times it just put work anxieties right back in front of my face.

4.3.5 Admitted Events and May 1st

The end of the spring is the last opportunity for colleges and universities to meet their goals and make their class. Spring is full of last minute meetings to discuss what the numbers are looking like and how aggressive you need to be in your outreach to accepted students. If the numbers are down you will be working tirelessly to get them up. At a small school, the budget and stability of the institution depends on the goal numbers established at the beginning of the cycle. Budgets are based around this expected number and coming in under the expected number not only causes instability, but can also lead to disain from faculty and staff. They wonder if their jobs are at risk if their program is

behind in enrollment or if their budget will be cut. Spring is tedious for everyone involved in the process.

Admitted student events act as one final effort to push enrollment. These events are aimed to enroll more students. Champlain hosts two different events, but other colleges will host a single event. What is similar among all admitted student events is the desire to highlight academic programs, show off your campus, share stories from current students and faculty members, and display all of the extra curricular opportunities available on campus. The preparation and tone for these events is set by how close you are to reaching your enrollment goals. Students have until May 1st to decide where they want to deposit and enroll. Most admitted student events take place in late March and early April. If your numbers are down leading up to these events, the preparation is mayhem. It is considered an “all hands on deck situation,” words that were actually spoken by our Vice President of Enrollment one year. New projects come into play to try and make the event even more over the top than usual. Can we bring live horses onto campus to highlight the Equestrian Club? Could Ben or Jerry come in and let our visiting students name a new ice cream variety? Variations of both of those scenarios existed at our admitted student events during a year when numbers were not looking good.

When the numbers are up or trending better than they have in previous years the attitude is very celebratory. The event preparations are calm, event schedules from the previous year are used and there is no need for a surplus budget to buy gifts or expensive local snacks to give out. In my time at Champlain, I experienced both of these scenarios: two years of record breaking high deposits before May 1st, one year of average numbers that brought us just under our expected goal, and one year where our numbers were well

below the intended goal leading up to the 1st. This reactive behavior that happens each spring meant it was never predictable. Each day you found out what the numbers were and how the team would progress for that day. It brought instability to the team during a time when everyone needed stability. It was always a very hard way to end each cycle. The highs and lows were unpredictable and that meant my anxiety was also unpredictable.

Once we reached May 1st the mood was solidified. We exceeded, met, or fell under our goal. The atmosphere was celebratory if the numbers were high. If the numbers were low it felt like loudly dropping something in the quiet room of a library. It makes people uncomfortable, some people stare angrily, and you feel sheepish and unsure of what to say. Regardless of the goal, it was always a time to exhale as this date marked the end of the cycle. I have heard people call May 1st Admissions Counselor Christmas. You can finally breathe, you can daydream about taking time off, and you can start leaving work while it is still light outside. You knew the hard work of the year was about to pay off as summer was within sight.

4.4 Summer

Our summer would follow the college academic calendar. It begins when the college students on campus head home for their summer vacation. May 1st doesn't only signify the deposit deadline, but the start to our summer season. Yes, there are still deposits trickling in and emails to answer, but the stress and chaos of the cycle are finally in a lulled state. It was always interesting, and exciting, to feel my anxiety evaporate around this time each year. My shoulders would lose their tension, my mind became clearer, and my attitude shifted to a much healthier state.

4.4.1 A Break

It is frowned upon to take time off during most of the admissions cycle. In the fall it is impossible, hence the sneaking of a few afternoon hours here and there. During the winter you are busy reading and the college is closed between Christmas and New Years. This is seen as enough of a break. The spring again poses as an impossible time to take time off because there are so many people visiting campus. So summer is rejoiced, you are finally able to use the generous time off benefits that most colleges provide.

Summer is a quiet time in most admissions offices; it is rare that the whole team will be in the office on any given day. It is more likely that only 2 or 3 people will be in. It can be a busy time for visits, so if you are in it is a busy time for you as well. Given this reality, the breaks are even more cherished. I tried to plan an exciting trip each summer to really feel unplugged and detached from my office and my work. These trips provided rejuvenation and reminded me how much I love traveling for pleasure.

4.4.2 Rest or Roam?

Each summer, counselors are faced with the decision to rest or to roam. You can certainly do both, but once you commit to roaming your calendar begins to fill up. During my time in admissions I often had summers that were so packed with personal activities and events that I was only in Vermont for a single weekend of the entire summer. There were weddings, family trips, excursions with friends, and weekend trips home or to the beach. I always went into summer thinking how nice it would be to finally enjoy Burlington in the summer, to relax, and to read for pleasure. But summer always filled up and flew by. It forever felt like the shortest season.

Each counselor on my team had a different approach to the summer. Some, like myself, would end up traveling every weekend and taking a couple sizeable trips during the summer. Others would take one large section of time off or take a day here and there. Each practice had benefits, taking a day here and there meant rarely working a full week the entire summer. The other key piece was deciding how you would spend this time, would it be relaxing and restful or would it be adventurous roaming that required travel and planning. One officemate in particular became known for her “staycations,” something I was never good at. A staycation is taking vacation time to simply stay put. You could stay in your home and rest or simply enjoy the ease of exploring your own neighborhood. Everyone had his or her own way of feeling rejuvenated and relaxed, whether it meant traveling far away or staying right at home.

4.4.3 Dreading, or Dreaming of, the Start of the Cycle

Each year the end of the summer arrived much sooner than the end of every other season. You wrapped up your vacations and started the whole cycle over again. It was time to create lists, compile data, and plan your fall travel. This work began in mid-August, and at this time counselors were happy to see each other again and be back in the office together. We caught up on summer adventures, sharing pictures and stories. It was still summer, so the mood was light and carefree. As the travel planning became more intense, and the new students arrived on campus for orientation at the end of August, it became much more real. Your calendar was now full of fall visits, weeks and weeks of travel. During this time of year I would always try to think of how to find more meaning in the upcoming fall travel season. I thought of Phil McGraw’s words, “I wanted to know how a person could live a life of real meaning and genuine passion, instead of just going

through the motions” (Couric 76). If I did not change my perspective I would dread the upcoming season and simply be “going through the motions.”

Most counselors transition between dreading the start of a new cycle and feeling excited for travel to begin again. Your summer has excited you with time out of the office and you are feeling energized to hit the road. The memories of traffic, sleepless nights, and bedbugs are a distant and hazy memory. The hard work you put into your travel planning makes you excited to go out and execute another year. This insane logic is what keeps counselors in this profession for more than their first year, and for many it is what keeps them in it for decades. There is a certain comfort in knowing that the tough and tiring portions of your job have an end date. It is nice to know that you will have a laidback summer to look forward to. I like to compare it to memories of a family reunion: they are hard to plan, full of chaos and drama, but 5 years later all you remember are the great memories and you can’t wait to plan another. That is why it takes a certain type of person to be in this role, and why there is a common saying within the industry: “You are either in it for 3 years or you are in it for life.” You either feed off the stressful cycles or you grow too tired of them. My third year was when I really began to feel like admissions would not be my long-term career. The strain on my mental health and the complicated moral problems surrounding admissions grew to be too much. I knew I needed to make some changes.

Chapter 5 - Commonalities & Conclusions

The intent of this scholarly personal narrative is to draw parallels and create understanding between the different parties involved in the college admissions process. I wanted to share my story to create connections. It has become an increasingly anxious process for students, parents, and counselors. I do not know everything there is to know on this process, the preceding chapters were my observations and opinions based on my professional experience at Champlain and my personal experiences as a student at both Gettysburg and the University of Vermont. I do not have a wide lens, but I do know several friends and colleagues in the counseling profession at schools all across the country, which helps to widen my lens. “By definition, writers are people who care enough to try to share their ideas with other people. We are not passive, or utterly cynical, because then we would not even bother. We have a deep yearning to connect, to write things down and pass them around” (Pipher 8). This document is a personal narrative, but I believe it shows some universal truths about the college search and application process that are relatable for all of those involved in the journey.

5.1 Where Do We Overlap?

As the title of this piece suggests, we can all agree that this is an anxious process. Our anxieties stem from different goals and struggles, but that does not lessen the chest tightening feeling that pushes down on you throughout the process. My reflections on my own college search give me an awareness of how single sided the anxiety feels. Each party feels as though they are the only ones feeling anxious. Applicants don’t know what happens behind the scene in an admissions office, like the travel assignments and ever

present goals, so they see their problems as the most pertinent. Counselors often grow numb to the anxieties that students face as they hear them so many times each year. We overlap in our lack of awareness and empathy, forgetting that there are actual people on the other side.

Our cyclical calendars overlap with many of the same feelings in the hectic fall or the emotional winter. There is so much more overlap than either party recognizes, a similarity that could strengthen bonds and personalize connections between students and counselors. Both sides are moving through a tedious and stressful process, but we often see each other as a commodity, not a person. There is a connective power in these dramatic shifts each season that needs to be harnessed as a commonality.

5.2 Where Can We Find Help and Support?

Counselors and students experience so many of the same feelings and we find relief in many of the same ways. We are all stressed as we try and meet goals and expectations. Many of us are struggling with anxiety and don't know how to put that into words. As noted earlier, it can be so hard to admit that you are feeling shaken or mentally unsteady. In her book, *I Thought It Was Just Me*, Brené Brown writes, "Shame forces us to put so much value on what other people think that we lose ourselves in the process of trying to meet everyone else's expectations" (xvii). We all feel a bit lost as we try to meet these goals and work through our difficult feelings. Without necessarily knowing it, our similarities go beyond the negative feelings and anxieties and continue in the way we mitigate that negativity. We lighten our moods by taking a break, catching up with friends, and finding others who can either commiserate or help us forget the issues at hand. Despite the gap in age and years, my high school self, college students today, and

many admission counselors find help and support in the same way. Interactions are warped due to technology and social media, but the intent is the same. There are nearly ten years between 2007 and 2016, but the feelings felt, and their solutions, are shockingly similar between all three perspectives.

5.2.1 The Power of Social Media

Social media was in its infancy during my junior and senior year of high school. It was becoming a connective tool that would help me keep in touch with my high school friends. My version of social media at that time was online instant messaging, something that all of my friends did to keep in touch when we were not in school. Similar to the outlets used by today's students, it was a relatively anonymous and easy way to talk to people without being face to face. I spent hours each week messaging with friends or chatting with my sister who was away at college. Many of those conversations revolved around our frustrations and anxieties during our senior year of high school, college decisions, or parent's expectations. Regardless of how archaic this method seems now, I still used what would be considered today's version of instant messaging when I was a counselor.

As mentioned previously, one of my outlets as a counselor was the opportunity to message friends and colleagues while at work. It was a great break to connect with college friends who were also at work and capable of chatting through our email chat feature. We would send each other links to funny articles or talk about plans for our next reunion. My colleagues would also use this chat feature so we were able to send quick commiserating messages after a long meeting or a week of late nights at the office. These

opportunities for quick connections throughout the day were an important part of maintaining my sanity and mental health during the most trying times at a counselor.

Today's students have several different platforms that they are able to use to connect with current friends and future college friends. I too have access to these outlets and, while it may shock some students, I use them pretty regularly. Seeing your friends' photos from a weekend trip or sending over a funny Snapchat is a fast way to feel connected and relaxed. It is a pretty mindless task that can provide an important dose of calm during a stressful time. We all use social media as a tool to provide happiness and connection with friends. Something today's students have easy access to, which earlier students did not, are social media spaces that allow for anonymous support.

In my third year as a counselor, right around the time that I felt like therapy was not working for me, my students introduced me to a social media application called YikYak. It was a place where people living in the same area could anonymously post anything that they wanted and others could anonymously comment on it. I added the application to my phone because I was curious about the gossip and popular posts that would be associated with Champlain, The University of Vermont, and the Burlington, Vermont area. While YikYak had a fair share of silly, party related posts, it also had many users that posted about their mental illnesses, especially anxiety.

Given the variety of experience I have had with social media, I was surprised to see the supportiveness of the app's community. The first thing that YikYak did for me was open my eyes to how many other people were experiencing the anxiety that I had felt for the past few years. From there I was impressed with the feedback that these mental health related posts were receiving. An NPR story explained Yik Yak concisely by

saying, “On the app Yik Yak, for example, college students are asking for help when they're feeling desperate or even suicidal — and the anonymous crowds are responding with kindness” (Shahani). I never posted anything, but I found solace in simply reading other posts and the supportive comments beneath each post. I started to feel connected, and calmer having read these familiar sentiments. It quickly helped to reinforce that “Healing stories give people hope, teach them empathy, and encourage action” (Pipher 13). It felt good to know that I was not alone, there were others feeling anxious and often much more anxious and unstable than I had ever felt. It put things into perspective for me and I helped me see the support available in the Burlington Community and college/university community.

The back and forth between posters and commenters also showed me that several students were struggling with their mental health. It permeated all parties that I worked closely with, connecting me even more with my prospective students and student workers. Those posting would often share their age or where they attend school, so it was easy to tell that these issues were plaguing high schoolers, college students, and recent graduates. I was not alone in my reaction and attitude towards the social media applications. Several colleges began writing on the student experience with YikYak. In an article from the University of Michigan, a student expressed, “Social media plays a really important role here, in that it provides a safe space for people to express feelings that they have, but don't feel comfortable sharing in other contexts” (Kinery). It became very clear that until there is less of a stigma surrounding mental health, there is a need for anonymous sites like YikYak that allow people to ask for help or simply share that they are in a dark place. It came at time when I doubted my own therapy; social media became

a substitute, as I would read through the support and suggestions that flowed so frequently in this online community. This was an eye-opening overlap between the power of social media and self care.

5.2.2 The Power of Self-Care

YikYak and other social media outlets can also act as a form of self-care. The term self-care may not be widely known among high school students, but they most likely practice it in some fashion without even realizing it. I first learned about self-care through my Master's program. My first course in the Master's of Education Interdisciplinary program, taught by Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray, focused heavily on the importance of mindfulness and self-care for students. What I wasn't aware of before this point was how it is an acceptable and important practice that you can, and should, allow yourself to participate in. At first the idea seemed indulgent, but I realized that I already did some activities that would be classified as self care. I snuck away for a few hours when returning early from work travel, I scheduled the occasional massage, and eventually attended some therapy sessions. Up until that particular course I did not give much thought to self-care and mindfulness, I felt like it was more important to work hard and push myself to get ahead. McCarty writes, "Mindfulness leads ultimately and inevitably to gratitude" (302). In the end, gratitude has brought me more power and positivity than pushing myself to "get ahead."

Robert and Sydnee's course, and my own therapy sessions, helped me realize the importance of carving out time for self-care. It was not a selfish or unprofessional practice, it was a necessary and important opportunity to recharge and center yourself. Yoga became more of a priority, as did reflective writing and taking a day off once in a

while as a “mental health day.” We are given vacation days and sick days to help to create a work/life balance, there should be no shame in taking those days to mentally steady yourself.

My wish for my former high school self and current high schooler’s is for their to be more of an emphasis on self care, especially during the college search and application process. As Nash and Murray write, “The quarterlife period is frequently a tumultuous time for most of our students, because it triggers an overwhelming anxiety about the past, present, and future, So many quarterlife students are plagued with worry about failure” (xviii). Students and parents are so often rushed and pressured that they, like me, assume they cannot afford a break or time to focus on themselves. In reality, when you feel that way, it is actually the most important time to stop, take a breath, and focus on yourself and your mental health. More self-care during my own high school years would have probably made my college search more thoughtful and more geared towards my needs, but I was not yet aware of those needs.

5.2.3 The Power of Reflection

Self-care can also incorporate the act of reflecting. It requires taking time and being mindful of your past and present actions. My discovery of, and devotion to, self-care gave me time to do more reflecting on my job, my education, and my goals. It helped me learn so much more about myself, and as Pipher writes, “Our sensibilities, our moral outlook, and our point of view are what we writers have to offer to the reader. Only when we know who we are can we fully offer these gifts” (35). Without reflection, I would not have a strong sense of who I am in this very moment. Reflecting helped me realize the roots of my anxiety. Reflection as a self-care practice created this SPN thesis.

The act of writing reflectively helped me see that, “Every Room gives us layers of information about our past and present and who we are, our shrines and quirks and hopes and sorrows, our attempts to prove we exist and are more or less okay” (Lamott 64). In my reflections I began to realize the commonalities and anxieties between prospective students and college counselors. I thought deeply about my own search and the changes in the process that today’s students now face. These thoughts grew as my writing continued and the reflections created more connections. In my fourth year as a counselor I was finally beginning to make powerful realizations about the system that my students and I were both in.

These pages are a reflection that I hope can be a tool for counselors and students alike. This contemplation expanded my own mind and increased my empathy. In remembering my own college search through the lens of a counselor I was able to reflect on how lucky I was. I had access, I had supportive parents, and I had options. These were things that I took for granted well into my college career. Only in my work as a counselor, after giving myself time to reflect, did I bring myself to realize how lucky and grateful I am. Through the tool of reflecting I also pushed myself to think of students and parents as individual people who do not know that I have heard their questions from 100 other people.

Reflection is a tool that can help create connection. As Lamott writes, “When you’re conscious and writing from a place of insight and simplicity and real caring about truth, you have the ability to throw the lights on for the reader. He or she will recognize his or her life and truth in what you say” (225). For me, reflective writing created empathy and gratitude, which really helped to improve my mental health. In a process

where mental health is often very fragile, reflection is a powerful tool. It is a tool that should be used more and used in a way that promotes self-care. My own reflections brought me to a place of realization, of understanding my students, my goals for the future, and myself. I realized how you could stay on the wrong path for far too long if you do not take time to reflect on your surroundings, your work, and your feelings. So many important connections and conclusions can come from thoughtful reflection. My hope is that my reflections “throw the lights on for the reader” and show them that there is a level of sameness, they are not alone in feeling anxious about this process. I challenge students and counselors to think deeply about these questions: “What stories have you been storing inside? Has the silence served you?” (Nash and Viray xii).

5.3 Where Do We Go From Here?

We now know a little bit more about each party involved in the college search and application process. We see the parallels in anxiety and the remedies we choose to quell that anxiety. Now what? Why is this important, and what do we do with this information? The stories, feelings, and observations shared so far are not all that groundbreaking. However, when you place them side-by-side, you are hopefully able to see the lack of understanding and the abundance of stress and confusion. There are lessons for both sides of this story, for students and counselors. Writing in the style of SPN is about learning and growing through the stories of others. It is about creating a sense of togetherness and community. So much of the SPN writing that I read acts as an intimate window into someone’s life that allows you to learn something new and see from a different perspective. What I provide here is reference material and framework. Where this

information takes a reader is up to them. My hope is that it can impact the college search and application process in a positive way.

5.3.1 Future of the Process

Based on my reflections and writing, there are so many clear parallels in the admissions process, but there is a lack of knowledge and understanding surrounding these parallels. The impact of this writing aims to humanize the students and counselors; us counselors were once students as well. If we can harness that sameness, we can bring more empathy back into the process. I would encourage more colleges and universities to personally highlight their counselors. This could be a blog post, a Facebook post, or even a video, something that gives counselors a platform to genuinely describe their own admissions process or the tough work they are doing in their office. An honest look inside an admissions office, a place often veiled in rumors and hidden behind websites, could help create some understanding. Personal variations of my own writing in this SPN thesis would be a way for counselors to share their struggles and their insights with prospective students and parents.

The admissions process is becoming more and more clouded by falsified rankings, complicated goals, and rising tuition costs. In my opinion it is spiraling into a barely recognizable business, instead of a welcoming academic environment. To begin to change the image of current colleges and universities, I believe we should look to a question posed by Sandel. He asks, “What virtues or excellences do universities properly honor and reward?” (191). Let’s spend more time working on this question, than raising tuition and worrying about the importance of rankings. The higher-level administration at colleges and universities, and the business people, who run the top college prep and

ranking companies, could benefit from reflecting on their own college search process, their goals, and the work that they are currently doing. For many, I bet they would be surprised by the connections they find and the missteps that they regret. Those working in the counseling field and the students and parents navigating the complicated algorithms of admissions need to find something positive to hold on to. They need a humanized process.

5.3.2 Future of Technology

A humanized process does not mean losing technology. There will always be developments in technology, with new resources and tools that aim to strengthen or streamline the process. As we have seen, the internet is full of so much negative and false information. In large full-page text a recent Time Magazine cover read, “Why we’re losing the Internet to a culture of hate” (Stein). The cover article goes on to discuss the negativity that “internet trolls” can bring into the world wide web, making it feel like an unsafe and unfriendly space (Stein). My goal is not to diminish technology, but rather use it to create more positive human interaction. To find a way to develop more communities like YikYak that allowed for positive interactions and minimal hateful commenting or bullying.

Technology is only going to increase; we live in a world where cars are beginning to drive themselves. Machines are replacing people at a surprising pace. College admissions is a realm that cannot afford that level of technology. We must find a balance between providing incredible online resources and actual people with their own college story. Despite online resources and virtual tours, students still comes to college fairs and contact counselors to set up in-person interviews. These pieces of the process may shift,

with more online college fairs and Skype style interviews, but they will never completely fade away. Very few students want to attend a faceless college or university. It is an industry that needs several faces and several stories. In comparison, most counselors I know really enjoy when they can put a face to a name on an application or recall an email sent from a student that they meet. It is personal touches that make both parties feel connected. The future of technology in the college admissions process should work towards making, and fostering, these connections.

5.3.3 Future of Me

In August, on my very last day of work at Champlain College, a journalist from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* interviewed me for an upcoming article. A college friend of mine, who also works in college admissions, had asked if he could share my contact information with the journalist, Eric Hoover. The article focused on what it was like to be a newer admissions counselor with 1-4 years of experience. The article would be published during the largest national conference for college counselors and admissions counselors. It would end up being titled, *The People Who Deliver Your Students* (Hoover).

I spoke freely in my interview, as it was my last day of work. I shared the ups and downs of my admissions career, as well as my salary, my frustrations, and even the topic for this very thesis. Eric and I spoke at length about the similarities of our current work, his article and my thesis. The timing was perfect, he caught me at a time when I was ready, and willing, to deeply reflect on my experiences. After our conversation, I was worried about what would be printed. I was afraid I spoke too freely; I did not want to

paint Champlain in a negative light or seem ungrateful for the job and opportunities I was given. I asked Eric to connect with me before publishing the article.

We spoke about a week before it was published and he shared what he had chosen to write about me specifically. He shared the subheading of the article, “How the ever-escalating competition for applicants, revenue, and prestige affects the front line” (Hoover). We chatted back and forth about how closely this phrase related to my thesis and my reasons for leaving admissions. I decided I was comfortable with what he wrote, but worried about how the counseling community would receive it. The morning the article became available on *The Chronicle* website, friends in the counseling community began to reach out, saying they read about me in the article. I quickly looked it up and read the entire thing. Eric had interviewed several admissions counselors, so I had to read many pages before finding my own section.

Soon the article was posted on the admissions Facebook page I mentioned previously. I kept an eye on it to see how it would be received and what comments people would leave. The reviews were mixed, some people agreed with the article - that young admissions counselors were over worked, over looked, and under paid. Others felt as though the article was too critical of a profession that they loved. As I continued to watch the feedback come in, I realized that the feedback didn't matter. As Lamott writes, “You don't want to spend your time around people who make you hold your breath” (170). For me, it was not necessarily the people, but a process and profession that caused me to constantly hold my breath. I reminded myself of these words: “Don't worry about being unavailable; worry about being absent or fraudulent. Risk being unliked. Tell the truth as you understand it” (Lamott 226). I had told my story and people would receive, and

perceive, it however they wanted. I was at terms with what I shared, it was my story and I would own it.

The Chronicle article helped set the tone for my path after admissions. That path is complicated. I've written these reflections and given my opinions on a system that I no longer work in. My reflections helped me to realize what my goals were and where I could best apply my skills to help reach those goals. SPN writing has a way of starting as one thing and turning into something entirely different by the end. It is my own personal narrative and my narrative is still evolving, and probably always will be. My writing became an outlet for my anxiety, a replacement for therapy, and a method of self-care. The future will hold more writing, and more reading, as a way to promote mindfulness and stability.

Writing and reflecting brought me to realize so many of the intricate problems within the college admissions process and field. The research that went into this writing brought me to more negative articles and resources than positive. So many people had so much to say when it came to problems and challenges within this process. In the time between writing my thesis proposal and beginning my thesis I realized I did not want to stay in the field of admissions. The problems in this field seemed too big to solve from the role I was in, and the inability to solve them increased my anxiety. I had taken steps to help manage my anxiety, but this was an area where I felt that I was not in a position to make a difference.

During this time my graduate courses had a big focus on higher education administration and conflict resolution. Through my writing, and through these courses, I learned a lot about myself, and how I handle conflict. I also learned a lot from my

classmates, who would share their opinions on university leadership. As I wrote, I contemplated what field I wanted to get into. I began to realize how important it was that I help to solve the problems that caused me to leave my work in admissions. I did not want to run from these problems; my frustrations were not the problems themselves, but the inability to effectively solve them. With the insight from my classmates on institutional leadership, and my own experience in working with students and families, I realized two paths that could help solve some of the problems within the admissions process.

The first path I am pursuing is volunteer work on the high school side of the process. I bring a college counselor's perspective, but I also continue my personal growth in making connections between high school students and counselors. I hope that I can apply knowledge from my professional experience and my graduate school experience that will help students finding meaning in their schoolwork, their college work, and their personal lives. As Nash writes in *Helping College Students Find Purpose*, "To be a meaning mentor, one needs only life experience, self-knowledge, and an interest in others and their journeys" (217). Working with high school students in this capacity brings a better level of understanding to the work that I had previously done. It is something that I wish I had the time to participate in while I was working as a counselor; I believe anyone in the field would benefit from seeing the other side of the process. You can see how important a connection is and the fragility of many students in the admissions process.

The second path is my professional path. My goal is to work in a position that would allow me to impact the leadership on college and university campuses. This could take shape in a number of different outlets. It became clear to me in admissions, and in

graduate school, how impactful leadership roles can be. It is important that the people in these roles understand the issues facing a given institution and the mission behind the school. Leadership that knows the struggles of the admissions process that keeps their institution afloat are leaders who can begin to change the process. This path is also about connections; I want my professional work to be about creating a human connection between leaders in education and the staff and students who work on their campuses.

I want there to be an understanding of the anxieties and issues that are plaguing both sides of the admissions process. With knowledge of this cyclical sameness, and the pressures we face with the changing seasons, we can begin to see that there are in fact humans on the other side. My wish for myself, and those reading, is to be more selfless and see outside myself. Recognize, and help others recognize, that there are two equal sides to this anxiety.

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